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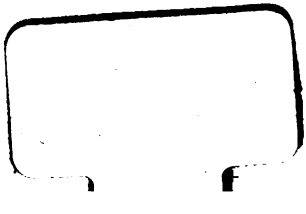
LEONARD MERRICK



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Agnes Davis.

July. 1912

WHISPERS ABOUT WOMEN

BY LEONARD MERRICK

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CONRAD IN QUEST OF HIS YOUTH
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CONTENTS

	PAGE
The Tragedy of a Comic Song	1
A Very Good Thing for the Girl	18
The Woman Who Wished to Die	34
The Fatal Florozonde	48
A Letter to the Duchess	68
The Prince in the Fairy Tale	87
The Third M.	109
The Bishop's Comedy	126
Tricotrin Entertains	144
The Infidelity of Monsieur Noulens	164
The Favourite Plot (with Variations)	180
Frankenstein II.	197
The Tale That Wouldn't Do	214
The Dress Clothes of Monsieur Pomponnet	226
The Call from the Past	245

Whispers About Women

I

THE TRAGEDY OF A COMIC SONG

I LIKE to monopolise a table in a restaurant, unless a friend is with me, so I resented the young man's presence. Besides, he had a melancholy face. If it hadn't been for the piano-organ, I don't suppose I should have spoken to him. As the organ that was afflicting Lisle Street began to volley a comic song of a day that was dead, he started.

"That tune!" he murmured in French. If I did not deceive myself, tears sprang to his eyes.

I was curious. Certainly, on both sides of the Channel, we had long ago had more than enough of the tune; no self-respecting organ-grinder rattled it now. That the young Frenchman should wince at the tune I understood. But that he should weep!

Yes, I was curious; I smiled sympathetically. "We suffered from it over here as well," I remarked.

"I did not know," he said, in English that re-

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proved my French, "it was sung in London also — 'Partant pour le Moulin?'"

"Under another name," I told him, "it was an epidemic."

Clearly, the organ had stirred distressing memories in him, for though we fell to chatting, I could see that he neither talked nor dined with any relish. As luck would have it, too, the instrument of torture resumed its répertoire well within hearing, and when "Partant pour le Moulin" was reached again, he clasped his head.

"You find it so painful?" I inquired.

"Painful?" he exclaimed. "Monsieur, it is my 'istory, that comic tune! It is to me romance, tragedy, ruin. Will you hear? I shall arrange my thoughts. Listen:"

It is Paris, Montmartre — we are at the door of a laundress. A girl approaches. Her gaze is troubled, she frowns a little. What ails her? I shall tell you: the laundress has refused to deliver her washing until her bill is paid. And the girl cannot pay it — not till Saturday — and she has need of things to put on. It is a moment the most anxious.

She opens the door. Some minutes pass. The girl reappears — under her arm a little parcel. Good! She has triumphed. As she comes out she sees a young man, pale, abstracted, who stands be-

fore the shop. He does not attempt to enter. He stands motionless, regarding the window with an air forlorn.

"Aha," she says to herself, "here is another customer who cannot pay his bill!"

But wait a little. After 'alf an hour what happens but she sees the young man again! This time he stands before a modest restaurant. Does he go in? No, again no! He regards the window sorrowfully. He sighs. The dejection of his attitude would melt a stone.

"Poor boy," she has thought; "also he cannot pay for a dinner!"

Still the affair is not finished. How beautiful it is the summer day! — she resolves to promenade. Figure yourself that once more she perceives the young man. Now it is before the Mont de Piété, the pawnbroker's, that he stands. She watches him attentively. Here, at least, he will enter, she does not doubt. She is wrong. It is the same thing — he regards, he laments, he turns away.

"Oh, mon Dieu," she has said. "Even nothing remains to him to pawn!"

It is too much! She has addressed him:

"Monsieur!"

But, when she has said "Monsieur," there is the question how she shall continue. Now the young man regards the girl instead of the pawnbroker's. Her features are pretty — or "pretty well;" her

costume has been made at 'ome, but it is not bad; and she has chic — above all she has chic. He asks:

"What can I have the pleasure to do for you?"

Observe that she is bohemian, and he also. The conversation has been like this:

"Monsieur, three times this morning I have seen you. It has been impossible that I resist speaking. You are in grief?"

"Frightful!" he has said.

"Perhaps," she has added timidly, "you are also hungry?"

"With a hunger insupportable, mademoiselle."

"I myself am extremely hard up, monsieur, but will you permit that I offer you what is in my power?"

"Angel!" the young man exclaimed. "There must be wings under your cape, but I beg of you not to fly yet. I shall tell you the reason of my grief. If you will do me the honour to seat yourself at the café opposite, we shall be in a position to talk more pleasantly."

This appeared strange enough, this invitation from a young man who she had supposed was starving; but wait a little! Her amazement increased when, to pay for the wine he ordered, her companion threw onto the table a bank-note with a gesture absolutely careless.

She was in danger of distrusting her eyes.

"Is it a dream?" she cried. "Is it a vision from the *Thousand and One Night*, or is it, indeed, a bank-note?"

"Mademoiselle, it is the mess of pottage," the young man answered gloomily. "It is the cause of my sadness: for that miserable money, and more to come, I have sold my birthright."

She was on a ship — no, what is it, your expression? —"at sea!"

"I am a poet," he explained; "however you may not know my work, I am not celebrated; I am Tricotrin, mademoiselle — Gustave Tricotrin, at your feet. For years I have written, supported by ambition, and an uncle who manufactures silk in Lyons. Well, the time is arrived when he is monstrous, my uncle. He says, 'Gustave, this cannot last — you make no living, you make nothing but debts. (My tragedies he has ignored.) Either you must be a poet who makes money, or you must be a partner who makes silk.' How could I defy him? — he holds the purse. It was unavoidable that I stooped. He has given me a sum to satisfy my creditors, and on Monday I depart for Lyons. In the meantime, I take tender farewells of the familiar scenes I may never behold again."

"How I have been mistaken!" she exclaimed. And then: "But the hunger you confessed?"

"Of the soul, mademoiselle," said the poet; "the most bitter!"

"And you have no difficulties with the laundress?"

"None at all," he groaned. "But in the bright days of poverty that have fled for ever, I have had many difficulties with her. This morning I reconstituted the situation — I have imagined myself without a sou and without a collar."

"The little restaurant," she questioned, "where I saw you dining on the odour?"

"I figured fondly to myself that I was ravenous, and that I dared not enter. It was ecstatic."

"The Mont de Piété?"

"There imagination restored to me the vanished moments when I have mounted with suspense, and my least deplorable suit of clothes." His emotion was profound. "It is my youth to which I am bidding adieu!" he cried. "It is more than that — it is my aspirations and renown!"

"But you have said that you have no renown," she reminded him.

"So much the more painful," said the young man; "the hussy we could not win is always the fairest — I part from renown even more despairingly than from youth."

She felt an amusement, an interest. But soon it was the turn of him to feel an interest — the interest that had consequences so important, so 'eart-breaking, so *fatales!* He had demanded of her, most naturally, her history, and this she related to

him in a style dramatic. Myself, I have not the style dramatic, though I avow to you I have for it an admiration.

"We are in a provincial town," she has said to the young man, "we are in Rouen — the workroom of a modiste. Have no embarrassment, monsieur Tricotrin, you, at least, are invisible to the girls who sew! They sew all day and talk little — already they are *tristes,* resigned. Among them sits one different — one passionate, ambitious — a girl who burns to be *divette,* singer, who is devoured by longings for applause, fashion, wealth. She has made the acquaintance of a little tradesman who bakes pastry. He has become fascinated, they are affianced. In a month she will be married."

The young man, Tricotrin, well understood that the girl she described was herself.

"What does she consider while she sits sewing?" she continued. "That the pastrycook loves her, that he is generous, that she will do her most to be to him a good wife? Not at all. Far from that! She considers, on the contrary, that she was a fool to promise him; she considers how she shall escape — from him, from Rouen, from her ennui — she seeks to fly to Paris. Alas! she has no money, not a franc. And she sews — always she sews in the dull room — and her mind rebels."

"Good!" said the poet. "It is a capital first instalment!"

"The time goes on. There remains only a week for the marriage morning. The little home is prepared, the little pastrycook is full of joy. *Alors,* there is an evening they go out; for her the sole attraction in the town is the hall of varieties. Yes, it is third class, it is not great things; however, it is the only one in Rouen. He purchases two tickets. What a misfortune; it is the last temptation to her! They stroll back; she takes his arm — under the moon, under the stars — but she sees only the lamps of Paris! She sees only that he can say nothing she cares to hear!"

"An unhappy man!" murmured the poet.

"They sit at a café table, and he talks, the fiancé, of the bliss that is to come to them. She attends to not a word, not a syllable. While she smiles, she questions (frenzied) how she can escape. She has commanded a sirop. As she lifts her glass to the siphon, her gaze falls on the ring she wears — the ring of their betrothal. 'To the future, *cher ange!*' says the *fiancé.* 'To the future, *vieux chéri!*' she says. And she laughs in her heart — for she resolves to sell the ring!"

Tricotrin had become absolutely enthralled.

"She obtained for the ring forty-five francs the next day — and for the little pastrycook all is finished. She wrote him a letter — 'Good-bye.' He has lost his reason. Mad with despair, he has flung himself before an electric car, and is killed. . . .

It is strange," she added to the poet, who regarded her with consternation, " that I did not think sooner of the ring that was always on my finger, *n'est-ce-pas?* It may be that never before had I felt so furious an impulse to desert him. It may be also — that there was no ring and no pastrycook! " And she broke into peals of laughter.

" Oh, mon Dieu," exclaimed the young man, " but you are enchanting! Let us go to breakfast — you are the kindred soul I have looked for all my life. By-the-bye, I may as well know your name? "

Then, monsieur, this poor girl who had trembled before her laundress, she told him a name which was in a while to crowd the Ambassadeurs, and be famous through all Paris — a name which was to mean caprices, folly, extravagance the most wilful and reckless. She answered — and it said nothing yet —" My name is Paulette Fleury."

The piano-organ stopped short, as if it knew the Frenchman had reached a crisis in his narrative. He folded his arms and nodded impressively.

" *Voilà! monsieur,* I 'ave introduced you to Paulette Fleury! It was her beginning."

He offered me a cigarette, and frowned, lost in thought, at the lady who was chopping bread behind the counter.

" Listen," he resumed:

They have breakfasted; they have fed the sparrows around their chairs, and they have strolled under the green trees in the sunshine. She was singing then at a little café concert the most obscure. It is arranged, before they part, that in the evening he shall go to applaud her.

He had a friend, also young, a composer, named Nicolas Pitou. I cannot express to you the devotion that existed between them. Pitou was employed at a publisher's, but the publisher has not paid him much better than his art. The comrades have shared everything: the loans from the Mont de Piété, the attic, and the dreams. In Montmartre it was said "Tricotrin and Pitou" as one says "Orestes and Pylades." It is beautiful such affection, hein? Listen.

Tricotrin has recounted to his friend his meeting with Paulette, and when the hour for the concert is arrived, Pitou has accompanied him. The musician, however, was, perhaps, the more sedate. He has gone with little expectation; his interest was not high.

What a surprise he has had! He has found her an actress — an artist to the tips of the fingers. Tricotrin also was astonished. The two friends, the poet and composer, said "Mon Dieu!" They regarded the one the other. They said "Mon Dieu!" again. Soon Pitou has requested of Tricotrin an introduction. It is agreed. Tricotrin has

presented his friend, and invited the *chanteuse* to drink a bock — a glass of beer. . . . *Apropos,* you take a liqueur, monsieur, yes? What liqueur you take? Sst, garçon! . . . Well, you conjecture, no doubt, what I shall say? Before the bock was finished, they were in love with her — both!

At the door of her lodging, Paulette has given to each a pressure of the hand, and said gently, "Till to-morrow."

"I worship her!" Tricotrin has told Pitou.

"I have found my Ideal!" Pitou has answered Tricotrin.

It is sublime, such friendship, hein?

In the mind of the poet who had accomplished tragedies majestic — in the mind of the composer, the most classical in Montmartre — there had been born a new ambition: it was to write a comic song for Paulette Fleury!

It appears to you droll, perhaps? Monsieur, to her lover, the humblest divette is more than Patti. In all the world there can be no joy so thrilling as to hear the music of one's brain sung by the woman one adores — unless it be to hear one's verse recited by the lips one loves. I believe it has been accepted as a fact, this; nevertheless it is true.

Yes, already the intention had come to them, and Paulette was well pleased when they told her of it. Oh, she knew they loved her, both, and with both

she coquetted. But with their intention she did not coquet; as to that she was in earnest. Every day they discussed it with enthusiasm — they were to write a song that should make for her a furore.

What happened? I shall tell you. On Monday, when Tricotrin was to depart for Lyons, he has informed his uncle that he will not go. No less than that! His uncle was furious — I do not blame him — but naturally Tricotrin has argued "If I am to create for Paulette her great chance, I must remain in Paris to study Paulette! I cannot create in an atmosphere of commerce. I require the Montmartrois, the Boulevards, the inspiration of her presence?" Isn't it?

And Pitou — whose very soul had been enraptured in his leisure by a fugue he was composing — Pitou would have no more of it. He allowed the fugue to grow dusty, while day and night he thought always of refrains that ran "Ohé, la la la!" Constantly they conferred, the comrades. They told the one the other how they loved her; and then they beat their heads, and besought of Providence a fine idea for the comic song.

It was their thought supreme. The silk manufacturer has washed his 'ands of Tricotrin, but he has not cared — there remained to him still one of the bank-notes. As for Pitou, who neglected everything except to find his melody for Paulette,

the publisher has given him the sack. Their acquaintances have ridiculed the sacrifices made for her. But, monsieur, when a man truly loves, to make a sacrifice for the woman is to make a present to himself.

Nevertheless, I avow to you that they have fretted because of her coquetry. In one hour it has seemed that Pitou had gained her heart; in the next her encouragement has been all to Tricotrin. Sometimes they have said to her:

"Paulette, it is true we are as Orestes and Pylades, but there can be only one King of Eden at the time. Is it Orestes or Pylades that you mean to crown?"

Then she would laugh and reply:

"How can I say? I like you both so much I can never make up my mind which to like best."

It was not satisfactory.

And always she added, "In the meantime, where is the song?"

Ah, the song, that song, how they have sought it! — on the Butte, and in the Bois, and round the Halles. Often they have tramped Paris till daybreak in meditating the great chance for Paulette. And at last the poet has discovered it: for each verse a different phase of life, but through it all, the pursuit of gaiety, the fever of the dance — the gaiety of youth, the gaiety of dotage, the gaiety of despair! It should be the song of the pleasure-

seekers — the voices of Paris when the lamps are lit.

Monsieur, if we sat 'ere in the restaurant until it closed I could not describe to you how passionately Tricotrin, the devoted Tricotrin, did work for her. He has studied her without cessation; he has studied her attitudes, her expressions. He has taken his lyric as if it were material and cut it to her figure; he has taken it as if it were plaster, and moulded it upon her mannerisms. There was not a *moue* she made, not a pretty trick she had, not a word she liked to sing for which he did not provide an opportunity. At the last line, when the pen fell from his fingers, he shouted to Pitou, "Comrade, be brave — I have won her!"

And Pitou? Monsieur, if we sat 'ere till they prepared the tables for déjeuner to-morrow, I could not describe to you how passionately Pitou, the devoted Pitou, did work that she might have a grand popularity by his music. At dawn, when he has found that strepitoso passage, which is the hurrying of the feet, he wakened the poet to cry, "Mon ami, I pity you — she is mine!" It was the souls of two men when it was finished, that comic song they made for her! It was the song the organ has ground out —"Partant pour le Moulin."

And then they rehearsed it, the three of them, over and over, inventing always new effects. And then the night for the song is arrived. It has

rained all day, and they have walked together in the rain — the singer, and the men who loved her, both — to the little café concert where she would appear.

They tremble in the room, among the crowd, Pitou and Tricotrin; they are agitated. There are others who sing — it says nothing to them. In the room, in the Future, there is only Paulette!

It is very hot in the café concert, and there is too much noise! At last they ask her: "Is she nervous?" She shakes her head: "Mais non!" she smiles to them.

Attend! It is her turn. Ouf; but it is hot in the café concert, and there is too much noise! She mounts the platform. The audience are careless; it goes on, the jingle of the glasses, the hum of talk. She begins. Beneath the table Tricotrin has gripped the hand of Pitou.

Wait! Regard the crowd that look at her! The glasses are silent, hein? The talk has stopped. To a great actress is come her chance. There is *not* too much noise in the café concert!

But, when she finished! What an uproar! Never will she forget it. A thousand times she has told the story, how it was written — the song — and how it made her famous. Before two weeks she was the attraction of the Ambassadeurs, and all Paris has raved of Paulette Fleury.

Tricotrin and Pitou were mad with joy. Cer-

tainly Paris did not rave of Pitou or Tricotrin; there have not been many that remembered who wrote the song; also it earned no money for them, because it was hers — the gift of their love. Still, they were enraptured. To both of them she owed equally, and more than ever it was a question which would be the happy man.

Listen! When they have gone to call on her one afternoon she was not at 'ome. What had happened? I shall tell you. There was a noodle, rich — what you call a "Johnnie in the Stalls" — who became infatuated with her at the Ambassadeurs. He whistled "Partant pour le Moulin" all the days, and went to hear it all the nights. Well, she was not at 'ome because she had married him. Absolutely they were married! Her lovers have been told it at the door.

What a moment! Figure yourself what they have suffered — both! They had worshipped her; they had made sacrifices for her; they had created for her her grand success; and, as a consequence of that song, she was the wife of the "Johnnie in the Stalls!"

Far down the street, but yet distinct, the organ revived the tune again. My Frenchman shuddered, and got up.

"I cannot bear it," he murmured. "You understand? The associations are too pathetic."

"They must be harrowing," I said. "Before you go, there is one thing I should like to ask you, if I may. Have I had the honour of meeting Monsieur Tricotrin, or Monsieur Pitou?"

He stroked his hat, and gazed at me in sad surprise. "Oh, but neither, monsieur," he groaned. "The associations are much more 'arrowing than that — I was the 'Johnnie in the Stalls!'"

II

A VERY GOOD THING FOR THE GIRL

BAGOT told us this tale in the Stage Door Club one night. We were sitting round the fire, talking of perfect love, and somebody asked him if he had ever thought of marrying.

"Once," said the comedian cheerfully.

"Couldn't you afford it?" His talent and the remains of his good looks were worth fifty pounds a week to him then, but there had been days — well, listen to Bagot!

"It wasn't that I couldn't afford it," he said with a laugh; "actors never wait till they can afford it. I escaped in a curious way. What saved me was being such an artist. Fact! I was really smitten. If I hadn't been an artist in spite of myself I should be shivering in the last train home to Bedford Park now, instead of talking to you dear boys in an arm-chair, with a glass at my side. What? Oh, I'll tell you about it with pleasure!

"Of course, you know I made my name as the 'Rev. Simon Tibbits' in poor Pulteney's *Touch and Go*. Some things a man doesn't forget, and I remember how I felt when I settled for the part bet-

ter than I remember yesterday. You see it was my first London engagement, and I had been trying to get one in London for sixteen years. Sixteen years I had been 'on the road'— and seen the amateurs with money sauntering onto the West End stage from their 'Varsity Club!

"My agent had told me to try my luck at the office over the theatre one morning in July, and when I went in, there was nobody there but a young man who I guessed must be Pulteney. He was sitting at the table with a pencil in his hand, fiddling with a cardboard model of one of the scenes, and looking as worried as if he had been Chancellor of the Exchequer.

"'Have I the honour of speaking to Mr. Pulteney?' said I. In those days I imagined authors were important persons.

"He flushed, and smiled — rather on the wrong side of his mouth, I thought: 'That's my name.'

"'I was sent round to see you about the part of the clergyman in your farcical comedy, Mr. Pulteney,' I said. I had really been sent to see the stage-manager, but soft soap is never wasted, and I was always a bit of a diplomatist.

"He asked me to sit down, and we talked. He was smoking a cigarette, and I thought for a moment he was going to offer me one. I suppose it occurred to him that it wouldn't be the right thing to ask an actor to smoke in the manager's room,

for he threw his own cigarette away. He was a gentleman, poor Pulteney, though he was a deuced bad dramatist.

"The manager came bustling back soon, and began to hum and haw, but Pulteney put in a word that made it all right. I was told it was a capital part, and a big chance for me, and I skipped downstairs and out into the street, feeling as puffed-up as if I owned the Strand. As a matter of fact, the salary wasn't much — I had had better money in the provinces — but the thought of making a hit in the West End so excited me that I was nearly popping with pride.

"Great Cumberland Place! wasn't I sold when the part came. You've no idea how duffing it really was. I don't mind saying that a good many jolly fine comedians would never have got a laugh in it. When I read the jokes I could have cried. It wasn't funny as the author wrote it, dear boys, believe *me*. I don't want to brag of what I've done — I'm not the man to gas about myself — but it was the 'character' *I* put into it that made Pulteney's piece!

"Well, the rehearsals weren't beginning for three weeks, and I kept hoping I'd see how to do something with it before the first 'call.' I spoke the lines one way, and I spoke the lines another way, and the more I studied the glummer I felt. I had my dinner at Exeter Hall several times and listened

to the people giving their orders; it was cheap, and I thought I might hear the sort of tone I was trying to get hold of. But I didn't. On the Sunday I went to three churches and sat through three sermons. Honest Injun! And that was no use. Talk about an R.A.'s difficulty in finding the right model? I spent eight dusty days scouring London for a model for the 'Rev. Simon Tibbits!'

"Then one afternoon I had come out of 'Prossers' Avenue.' As it happened I wasn't thinking 'shop;' I wasn't thinking about anything in particular; and all of a sudden I heard a voice. *A* voice? I heard *the* voice. I heard the voice I needed for the part!

"I jumped. My heart was in my throat. There, smiling up at a six-foot constable, was a little parson asking the way to Baker Street. He looked like an elderly cherub, with his pink cheeks, and his innocent, inquiring eyes. I held my breath in the hope he would go on talking, but the policeman had answered him, and he tripped along with merely a 'Thank you.' He tripped along with the oddest walk I have ever seen; and I dodged after him, never taking my gaze off his legs, and studying them all the way to Charing Cross.

"As I expected, he was going by 'bus. There was one just moving. Up went his umbrella, and the next moment I was on the step, too, intending to lure him into conversation as soon as I could, and

master his voice as nicely as I was mastering his legs.

"'Full inside,' said the conductor, putting his dirty hand before my face. I was so annoyed I could have punched his head!

"Well, there was nothing for it but to go on top, and wait for someone to get out. Hang it, nobody did get out, and I saw no more of my little model till we reached Baker Street. I meant to let him walk a few yards, and then ask him to direct me to Lord's, but there was a surprise for me; he tripped across the road into the station. 'Oho,' I said to myself, 'training it? So much the better! We're going to have a comfortable chat together, after all, you and I!'

"I kept as close to him when he took his ticket as if I'd designs on his watch, and I heard him say, 'Third class to Rickmansworth, if you please.' This was rather awkward — I didn't want to pay a long fare, and I didn't know the line well; *I* had to book as far as Rickmansworth, too. When we got round to the platform the train was there, and he hovered up and down for five mintues or more, looking for a seat to suit him; I began to think we'd both be left behind. Then just as they were slamming the doors, he made up his mind. In he went, and I after him, and — what do you think? We were both on the same side of the compartment, with a fat woman and a soldier between us!

"Two passengers between us, I give you my word, and no room opposite. Not only I couldn't talk to him — I couldn't even see him. Every time we drew into a station I prayed the compartment would thin a bit; I sat tense, watching the faces. Not a sign on them! You've heard of the American rustic who got so exasperated standing up in a crowded car, that at last he shouted, 'Say! ain't none o' you people got homes?' That was how *I* felt."

Bagot's imitation of the rustic was very good, and we signified our appreciation in the usual way. When the laugh was over someone told the waiter we were thirsty, and the story-teller filled his pipe.

"Well," he resumed, puffing, "to cut a long journey short, we reached Rickmansworth without my having had a glimpse of my gentleman. I was about desperate now. He hadn't taken a dozen steps when I overtook him, and asked if he would be kind enough to inform me whether any decent apartments were to be had in the village. It didn't seem worth while to have had all this bother just to hear him speak again for ten seconds, and I was wishing myself back in my apartments in Kennington. I said the first thing that came into my head.

"It turned out to be the best question I could have put.

"'I am a visitor myself,' he said, beaming at

me, 'but I believe there are rooms to be had in Cornstalk Terrace. Yes, I am almost positive I noticed a card in a window as I passed through this morning."

"I stood simply lapping his voice up.

"'Is it difficult for a stranger to find?' I asked.

"'No, indeed,' he said, 'it is quite near. But I am going there; if you care to accompany me —'

"'Oh, you're too good!' I exclaimed, and upon my word I could have hugged him!

"The road was a great deal nearer than I wanted it to be, for he was chirruping to me beautifully, and I hated to part from him. When we arrived I effervesced with gratitude, and he hoped I'd find comfortable quarters; and then I went straight back to the station — and heard that I had just missed a train! Pleasant? Rickmansworth isn't the sprightliest place I've ever waited in either. I had some nourishment in the bar of the hotel across the way, and I examined the High Street. It wasn't extensive. The barmaid had told me there was a park close by, so I started to discover it. I wasn't keen on the park, you understand, but I thought it would be a nice quiet spot to rehearse in and see if I had caught the little cleric's voice. As I was going along, past a row of villas, blest if I didn't come across him again, standing at his gate!

"He supposed I had been hunting for lodgings all the time, so, of course, I had to keep the game

up. He was a friendly old chap and, honour bright, I felt sorry to think I was going to turn him into ridicule on the stage. Still he would never know, and actors can't be choosers. He went inside to ask his landlady if she could recommend any diggings to me; and a minute afterwards, out he fluttered to say he had quite forgotten there would be a couple of rooms vacant in that very house next day. Jehoshaphat! I had had no more idea of taking rooms than I had of taking the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. But it was too gigantic a chance to miss. I fixed the matter with the old woman there and then — and the next morning my model and I were living under the same roof! . . . Pass the matches, one of you fellows my pipe's out. . . .

"At the back of the house there were some lettuces and a clothes-prop that were called a 'garden.' My parlour was at the back, too; and after dinner I saw the rector airing himself. By now I had learnt he was a rector. I lost no time in joining him, you may be sure — I wasn't paying two rents to go to sleep on the sofa — and we discussed politics and public libraries. It was a bit heavy for me, but I didn't worry much what he talked about so long as I could hear his dulcet tones. I ought to have said there was a bench against the clothes-prop; so far as her means permitted, the old woman did things handsomely.

"There was a bench, and we sat down on it; and while we were sitting there, the door opened — and out into the sunshine there came a young and beautiful girl. She wore a white cotton frock, and there was no paint or powder on her face, and she had the kind of eyes that make you want to say your prayers and be good. I'm not going to gush — I'm holding myself in — but on my honour she was just the saintliest picture of English maidenhood ever seen in a poet's dream!

"'My daughter,' said my model.

"I was so staggered that I bowed like a super at a bob a night.

"Yes, the old woman did things handsomely — there was room for three on the bench. She sat by me, turning a backyard into paradise — I mean the girl, not the old woman — and I forgot to study her father for half an hour. I heard where his living was, and why they were taking a holiday, and I stammered that I was an actor, and was afraid they'd be shocked. I was stupid to own it, though it was all right and they didn't mind; but there was something in that girl's eyes that forced the truth from you in spite of yourself. I had been going to say I was in the City, but the lie stuck.

"There's some fine country round Rickmansworth — 'Ricky,' the natives call it — and we used to explore, the three of us. We'd go to Chorley Wood, and to Chenies — what a good 'back cloth'

Chenies would make! By the end of the week we were together nearly all the day. They invited me into their room to supper, and after supper Marion would sing at a decrepit piano. The meals were quite plain, you know — sometimes we'd pick the green stuff in the garden ourselves — but, boys, the peace of that little village room in the lamplight! The minister and his child — the simple, God-fearing man and that girl with her deep, grave eyes, and earnest voice. Their devotion to each other, the homeliness of it all! To me, a touring player, it was sweet, it was wonderful, to be welcomed in an atmosphere of home.

"If the comedy had been put into rehearsal on the date arranged it would have been better for me. But it wasn't — the rehearsals were postponed — and soon I was thinking much more of Marion than of my part. I used to talk to her of — well, of things I had never talked of to anyone except my mother when I was a kid. Somehow I didn't feel ashamed to talk of them to that girl. She took me out of myself. She raised me up. The footlights were forgotten.

"Oh, I had no right to think of her in the way I did, of course! What could I hope for? There was a world between us, and I saw it. I told myself that I had done all I came to do, and that I ought to go back to town at once; I told myself I was mad to stay there. But I knew I loved her.

I loved her as I have never loved a woman since — and there were moments when I thought that *she* was fond of *me.*"

Bagot, it was rapidly becoming evident to us, had forgotten that he had prefaced the story by congratulating himself on not having married the girl. His voice trembled. We saw that, carried away by his own intensity as a narrator, he was beginning to believe he was a blighted being. But we looked sympathetic, and let him "work it up."

"One day she owned she cared for me," he continued, with a far-away air. "It was the day before they were going home, and we were talking of our 'friendship.' Somehow I — I lost my head, and she was crying in my arms.

"I asked her to marry me. I swore she should never repent it. She sat listening to me with her hands limp in her lap, and a look on her face that I shall see till I die. She was afraid — not of me, but that her father wouldn't consent. They had no violent prejudice against the theatre, but she had never been to one in her life; for her to marry an actor seemed an impossible thing.

"I went to him right off. I told him I worshipped her; I implored him to trust her to me. It was an awful shock to him; I don't believe he had had a suspicion of the state of affairs — he reproached himself for letting it come about. But he was very gentle. He said he had hoped for a far

different future for her, still that all he wanted was for his child to be happy; he said he couldn't stand in her way if he knew she was really sure of herself. In the end he promised she should marry me if she wanted to in three years' time.

"When I parted from her we considered we were engaged; and in the evening, after they left, I went to town.

"I went to town, and there was a 'call' for the first rehearsal of *Touch and Go*. I had forgotten business, I had forgotten everything but Marion. That 'call' paralysed me. I saw what I had done, I realised the situation. The girl I was to marry reverenced her father — and I meant to burlesque him on the stage!

"I couldn't do it, I wouldn't! How could I think of it now? It wasn't that I feared their finding it out — as I tell you, they weren't play-goers, and their home was a good way off besides — it was the heartlessness of the thing that frightened me. To 'make myself up' as *her* father? To speak the bland, hypocritical lines of the part in her father's voice, to mimic him, to turn him into ridicule to amuse a crowd. I say how could I do it?

"All the same it was precious difficult to avoid, for I had studied him so long. But I went to the show the first day and rehearsed as I had expected to rehearse before I met him. Perhaps not so well; it was a strain *not* to be like him after all my study,

and it made me tame and stiff. I rehearsed so the first day, and for three or four days, and presently I began to notice that the Management was a bit unhappy, and that Pulteney nearly twisted his moustache out during my scenes. If an author has written a bad part, trust him to blame the actor! He buttonholed me at last, and begged me 'to put a little more "character" into it.' And I tried to: but I knew it was a failure, for I could only see one 'character' all the time — and that one I wouldn't touch.

"When I was in the stalls once, he and the manager sat down and put their heads together. It was dark in front, and they hadn't seen me as they came round. I heard them say something about 'A pity they hadn't a West-End actor for the part.' I knew they were talking of *my* part, and it got my dander up; I knew I could act any of that West-End hoity-toity Company off the stage; I knew I had only to 'let myself go.'

"When I went 'on' again I determined I'd show 'em what I could do; I determined I'd show 'em they had a better comedian than any forty-pound-a-weeker. I sent them into fits; 'Hallo!' they said. The women in the wings stopped talking about their dresses to watch me. The highly-connected amateurs from Oxford and Cambridge began to give at the knees, and I could hear the leading-man's heart drop on to the boards; the

actor from the provinces was wiping them out! That rehearsal was the sweetest triumph of my life.

"She'd never know — she'd never know! I kept telling myself she couldn't hear of it. By the time the wig that I ordered was tried on I felt as sure of success as I was of my lines! I was soaked in the part. I wasn't *acting* the little rector — by George, I *was* the little rector, trip, face and chirrup. And the first night came, and I was to play in London at last!

"They told me the house was crammed. All the swell critics were there, all the fashionable first-nighters. I was so nervous that the wig-paste shook in my hands when I 'made up,' but I was ready much too soon.

"I went downstairs and waited. The door-keeper gave me a note. Of all the — ! It was from Marion. A friend had brought her up to see me, and she was in the theatre. I was stunned, I thought I was going to fall. *You* know — every man in this room knows — that for an actor to remodel his performance at the last minute would be a miracle. I couldn't do it, it wasn't in my power, but even then I thought I'd try. I said I *must* try, though it would ruin me! And I heard my cue.

"My first lines 'went' for nothing. I floundered — the audience were ice; I saw the people on the stage looking at me aghast. Then suddenly I got a laugh: a gesture, an intonation, something I

had been trying to hold back, had escaped me. The laugh went to my head — I made them laugh again! I said I'd explain to Marion — that she'd understand, that she'd forgive me — and even while I said it, my other self, the 'self' that wasn't acting, knew it was a lie and I was losing her.

"I couldn't help it — the laughter made me drunk; I did it all! I knew the disgust she must be feeling, but the audience were roaring at me now; I felt the shame that she was suffering with my own heart, but the artist in me swept me on. The manager panted at me in the wings: 'You're great — you're immense. Gad! you're making the hit of the piece!' The stalls were in convulsions, the gallery had got my name. *'Bagot!'* they were shouting — after each act, *'Bagot!'* Pulteney rushed to me with blessings at the end. The house thundered for me. It was London! I knew that I was 'made'! But across the flare of grinning faces, I seemed to see the Angel I had lost and the horror in her eyes."

Bagot bowed his head; his pipe had fallen, tears dripped down his cheeks. By this time he was quite sure he had been mourning for her ever since beside a lonely hearth.

"She wrote to me next day, breaking it off," he groaned. "She wouldn't listen to reason; she said it 'might be art, but it wasn't love.'"

"Did you ever see her afterwards?" we asked.

"Once," he said, "years later. She married

some County chap, with an estate and all that. I saw her driving with her little boy. She looked very happy I thought. Women soon forget." After a pause he added bitterly: "If one of you fellows" — he glanced at the only author in the room — "cares to write the true tragedy of a man's life, there it is. You might call it 'The Price of Success.'"

But we all thought a more appropriate title would be the one that I have used.

III

THE WOMAN WHO WISHED TO DIE

My meeting with Mr. Peters was so momentous that I can't resist mentioning it was due to someone I had never seen — to a trifle; I can't resist referring to my own affairs for a moment. I was supposed to be at work on a novel, and I had a mind as infertile as mashed potato. One day in August I tumbled a receipt out of a desk, and saw that the lady to whom I sent my stories to be typewritten had had nothing from me to typewrite for two months. The discovery dismayed me. I was ashamed to realise how slowly I was getting on, and resolved to try a change of surroundings. My trip altered the course of lives — and I shouldn't have made it but for the reproach of a stranger's receipt.

I decided upon Ostend, by way of Antwerp, where I wanted to see the pictures; also I meant to visit Brussels, where I wanted to see my prettiest cousin. And in Antwerp — behold Mr. Peters! As I was wandering through the gallery an American asked me if I could tell him in which of the rooms he would find "The Last Communion of St. Francis of Assisi." Having just been directed to it myself

— just been startled by the faultless fluency of an official's English — I had the information pat, and the American and I proceeded to the room together.

I remember feeling it incumbent on me to be pained by the first words he spoke in front of the picture.

"I am told," he remarked, "that Rubens sold this work for sixty pounds, English money, and that forty thousand pounds were subsequently paid for it. Rough on Rubens!"

I affected the tone of the Superior Person. "You would see it better if you stood further away," I said; "what do you think of the painting?"

"Of the painting," he answered, "I am no judge, but the way the value of that property has risen just astonishes me."

I did not think I should like him, but I began to like him surprisingly soon. He was a sad-faced, middle-aged man, with a simple manner that was wonderfully winning. In less than five minutes I was humiliated that I had sneered at him in front of "St. Francis of Assisi." By what right, how much did I understand of it myself? My attitude had been nine-tenths pose. This man was genuine; he spoke of what he found interesting. And he proved anything but a fool.

We went down the steps of the Musée des Beaux Arts side by side, and strolled through the hot streets, among the swarm of ragged Flemish chil-

dren — there are more ragged children to the square yard in Antwerp than in Westbourne Park — to the quarter of the hotels. It turned out that we were staying at the same one, he on the first floor and I on the fifth, and after dinner we drifted together to the Place Verte, and talked there under the trees while the band played.

He told me that he had not been to Europe before, and I discerned that he was a lonely man persevering with the effort to enjoy himself.

"The fact is," he said, handing me his cigar-case, "I ought to have made the trip some years ago.— Won't you try a cigar, sir? — There's nothing the matter with Europe, but I guess I'm not quite so keen on sight-seeing as I was. When I was a lad I was dead-stuck on coming over, but I hadn't the dollars then. I promised myself to have a good time when I was thirty, and I hustled. When I was thirty I had made a few dollars, but I saw no chance of the good time — I was still hustling. One afternoon it occurred to me that I was forty. It displeased me *some;* seemed to me that good time was never coming. At the start I had aimed to be the boss of a business, but now the business had got so big it was bossing me. 'Well,' I said, 'you have made your pile, and you have nobody to spend it on but yourself; next year you shall quit, and have that good time you have been working for so long.' But it didn't come off. The business went on swell-

ing, and I went on saying, 'Next year.' And before I knew where I was - was fifty, and" — his voice dropped a little — " and I have never had the good time yet."

He was leaving for Ostend the next morning, and, when we parted, I was sorry he wasn't to remain in Antwerp till the end of the week like myself. However, in Ostend I expected we should meet again, for I did not mean to stay long in Brussels. It is a beautiful city, and many of us would admire it much more if it did not set us yearning for Paris. The resemblance is striking, but the fascination is absent. To go to Brussels is like calling on the sister of the woman one is in love with. Brussels is Paris provincialised; one realises it before one has sat outside a café for an hour and watched the types go by. Literally it is provincialised in August, when most of the theatres are closed, and the streets are peopled by excursionists. I had intended to stay three or four days at most, but duty to my relatives kept me with them for ten or twelve, and at last when I did reach Ostend I had almost forgotten Mr. Peters.

The thought of him recurred to me as I made my way towards the Kursaal on the first evening, and I wondered if he was still here. It was eight o'clock, and now that the glare of sun upon the blistered *Plage* had faded, and the radiance of electricity had risen in its stead, the town was looking

its best. Ostend was still dining. The long continuous line of hotel windows fronting the sea was brilliant. Window after window, wide, curtainless, and open to the view. A frontage of gleaming tables and coloured candle-shades — a dazzling frontage of flowers, and faces, and women's jewelled necks and arms.

In the Kursaal the orchestra was playing "L'Amico Fritz." I had listened to the music for perhaps half an hour when I saw Mr. Peters. He was with a friend, and he passed without observing me. They sat down a short distance off, and I noticed that he was talking with much animation to her, with much more animation than he had shown with me. Indeed, I think that was what I noticed first of all — the unexpected animation of Mr. Peters.

But the next instant I was engrossed by his companion. She was not youthful; I didn't consider her pretty; her dress, rich as it was, appeared to me a dowdy sort of thing among the elaborate costumes around us. Then what engrossed me? Well, it was the expression that she wore. I am trying to find the word. "Pleasure," of course — but that says nothing. As nearly as I can explain, it was the wonder in her look. The "wonder," that is it! There were crow's-feet about her eyes, and her gaze shone with a young girl's wonder.

Evidently the interest in the conversation was mu-

tual, and I assumed that they had known each other in the States. Then a second time they passed me, and I heard her speak, and she had no trace of the American accent. It began to seem to me that Mr. Peters had been making very good use of his time in Ostend.

I saw him with her again on the morrow, and on the next day, but two or three days went by before I saw him alone. When we did have a chat, I couldn't withstand the temptation to allude to her.

"You're in better spirits," I said; "have you come across anybody from the 'other side' to cheer you up?"

A suspicion of a smile flickered across his thin, shrewd lips.

"No," he drawled; "no, I have met no acquaintances in Europe yet, but—" He handed his cigar case to me: "Won't you try a cigar, sir?—but I am getting along."

I used to wish he would present me to her, but he never did. Constantly those two figures sat together in the Kursaal. In the concert-room or on the terrace, if I found the little woman I found Mr. Peters. Never to my knowledge did she speak to anybody else. And always the girlishness of her gaze held and mystified me — always, that is to say, until the end was approaching.

Of course, I didn't know that it threatened the end then, but I couldn't fail to perceive the differ-

ence. The curiosity she had inspired in me was so strong, I had watched her so intently for nearly a fortnight — oh, it may sound vulgar; I don't defend myself — that the first time I glanced across at her face and saw trouble there, I was sensible of a distinct shock. And in the next few days I said it was heavy trouble. It was as if the blaze within her were dwindling, as if it were dying out, and leaving her cold and grey. I said — it is a great word, but once I said the look on her face was "terror."

I did not attach any importance to the fact that Mr. Peters was sitting alone on the terrace when I went to the Kursaal that evening, because I supposed that he was waiting there for her to come in; it was when I found him alone in the same place much later that I was surprised. You know how you understand sometimes, without a gesture, that a man wants you to sit down by him, but doesn't want you to speak; I knew that Mr. Peters wanted me to sit down by him, and didn't want me to speak. I think we must have sat looking at the track of moonlight on the sea for a quarter of an hour before either of us said a word.

Then he remarked drily, "My friend has gone."

"You must miss her," I responded.

He mused again, and handed his cigar case to me with his usual question. I said I would have a cigarette.

"You found me dumbfounded," he resumed, puffing his cigar deliberately, "by the most singular occurrence I have heard of in my life; I am beginning to get my breath back. You may have noticed the lady?"

I said that I had.

"I guess that you assume her to be a wealthy woman?"

I said that I did.

"Well, sir, she is about as poor as they make them. I have lived too long to be extravagant with emotions, but that little lady's history has just broken me up. As a writer you may find it worth your attention. It was because she had always been solitary; that was what started the trouble — her loneliness. It's an awful thing to conjecture how many poor little women in London are breaking their hearts with loneliness. Never a companion she had, never a pleasure. Mornings she walked to her employment; evenings she walked back to where she lodged. She was a girl of eighteen then, and she walked cheerfully. And she was cheerful when she was twenty, and twenty-five, and thirty — always keeping her pluck up with the thought of something brighter ahead, you know; always hoping, like me, for that 'good time.'"

"Go on," I said.

"When she had been clerking years, and doing home work in her leisure, she had put a small sum

by. But she was frightened to touch it — there was the growing fear of the lonely woman that one day she might take sick and need that money. And the 'good time' didn't come. And her youth went out of her, and lines began to creep about her eyes and mouth — she looked in the glass and saw them — and she didn't walk to and fro quite so bravely now. Twenty years odd she had had of drudgery, and the hopefulness was dying in her. She was just faint with longing, sir. She wanted to put on pretty things before she was old — she was starving for a taste of the sweets that she was meant for."

He blew a circlet of smoke into the air, and watched it.

"That stage passed. Seemed to the woman, as time dragged on, that she hadn't the energy left to long for anything. She was tired. When she lay down to sleep she wasn't particularly keen on waking up any more. As I see the matter, it was by no means the work that had done the damage — it was the dulness. It was the emptiness of her life, the forlornness of it. By-and-by she had to go to a doctor, and he talked about 'depression' and 'melancholia.' He said what she ought to do was to live with friends — she was about as friendless as Robinson Crusoe before Friday turned up — he recommended her to seek 'gay society!' She said she was 'much obliged,' and went back to her lodging, and sat staring from the window at the

strangers passing in the twilight. I don't know whether you have struck a case of melancholia? A man I was fond of was taken that way in Buffalo. Out of business he would sit brooding by the hour, with his eyes wide, and never saying a word. I stayed talking to him once half the night, persuading him to put a change of linen in his grip, and start for Europe in the morning; I told him it would do him good to hustle round the stores, buying most things he needed to put on, after he arrived. I guess my arguments weren't so excellent as my intentions — when I went down town after breakfast I heard he had shot himself. Melancholia's likely to be serious. . . . No, the doctor's advice wasn't much use to the little woman. Her walk to the office lay across some bridge. One evening, as she was crossing it, the thought came that it would be sweet if she were lying in the river and heard the water singing in her ears. Then she tore herself away because she had turned giddy. Every morning and evening she had to cross that bridge, you understand me. Every morning and evening that thought pulled at her, and she stopped by the parapet and looked down."

In the pause he made, the music from the concert-room was painfully distinct. They were playing the "Invitation to the Valse."

"Well, just as with the friend I lost in Buffalo," he went on quietly, "while she did her work like a

machine all day, she was proposing to die. She had grown so woeful tired that it was a relief to her to think of dying. . . . You will smile at what I am going to say. One afternoon she saw an ordinary picture advertisement stuck on a wall — a picture of a Continental resort, with fashionable ladies parading on the *Plage*. She told me that — with the thought of death great in her mind — she stood right there in the London street, looking at it; and, sir, her regret was that she was going out of the world without having once worn a pretty frock, or bought a handful of roses in December! You may laugh at the idea of a commonplace poster influencing a woman at such a time?"

"I am not laughing," I said.

"She harped on that grievance of hers till some of the interests of her girlhood stirred in her again. The enthusiasm had gone, but she was wistful. And she'd sit thinking. She'd sit looking at her savings-book — all she had to show for her life. She figured out that she might break away from her employment and have luxury for a month. When the month was up she'd be destitute, but that didn't matter because, you see, she was quite prepared to go to sleep in the Thames. That little drudge, in that little stuffy lodging, took a notion to escape for once into the sunshine; she asked herself why she shouldn't live for a month — before she died! . . . .

"She was timid when she went to buy the showy frocks; she touched the daintiest of them lovingly, but she was shy to choose them for herself. She felt that she had entered the store too late to wear the things she had hankered for so long. She came here the day after I arrived. She appeared a sad little body, sitting next to me at table; perhaps that was why I took to her so; but now it just amazes me to think of the way she livened up when we had grown friends. I have heard her laugh, sir! I have heard her laugh quite happily, though her cash was melting like an ice cream in an oven; though she had come to tremble each time she changed a gold piece; though she had come to shudder at each sunset that brought her nearer to the End. It was only this afternoon that she told me the circumstances; I had seen she had anxiety, and I — asked questions. I looked to meet her again this evening, but I got a letter instead to say I should never meet her any more. When they handed me her letter she had — gone."

"You don't mean she — she's dead?" I whispered.

"Not yet," he said. "She wrote that our friendship had helped her some; she wrote that she was going back to her old lodging, and would struggle on. But she resigned her position, and she has damaged her last bank-note — how long do you surmise that she will have the heart to struggle?"

He lit another cigar; and among the jewelled, exotic crowd we stared absently over the rail at the humble flock of weary trippers who lacked the shillings to come in. One may do worse than cross to Ostend merely to stand by that slender rail and watch the two worlds that it divides.

At last I said: "She must have liked you very much! Her feelings for you made her want to live; and then, to remain here with you, she squandered the money that she needed to keep her alive."

"It makes me feel good to hear you say so," he returned. "It is not encouraging that she has disappeared, knowing that she had never mentioned even the quarter where she lodged; but it would be the proudest moment of my life if that little lady would consent to marry me. When we get up we shall say 'Good-bye' — I am starting for London right away."

"Without a clue to her address?"

"Yes, *sir,* without a notion. I don't know where she lodges, and I don't know where she worked, and London's a mighty big city; but I estimate there are about two sovereigns between that woman and the river, and I have to find her before they're gone."

In his glance I saw the grit that had built his fortune. I tried to be hopeful.

"If she's hunting for a situation she'll look at the newspapers," I said.

"She will look at the columns that interest her,"

he answered, "but I mayn't advertise on every page."

"You can pay for inquiries."

"You may bet I'll pay; all that worries me is that inquiries go slow."

"I suppose you don't know which bridge it is she crosses every day?"

"We can build no hopes on the bridge," he replied; "I did not interrogate her — I did not suspect it was to be our last meeting."

"She may struggle longer than you think; she may be brave."

"You mean it kindly," he said, "but you have heard her history! I opine that I've got to discover that address within a week — I am racing against time. There's just this in my favour, she has a name to be noticed. She's called 'Joanna Faed,' and I guess there can't be many women called that, even in a city the size of London."

"What an extraordinary thing!" I faltered. "I can give you 'Joanna Faed's' address on half a hundred receipts. Why, she must be the lady who typewrites my stories for me!"

IV

THE FATAL FLOROZONDE

BEFORE Pitou, the composer, left for the Hague, he called on Théophile de Fronsac, the poet. *La Voix Parisienne* had lately appointed de Fronsac to its staff, on condition that he contributed no poetry.

"Good-evening," said de Fronsac. "*Mon Dieu!* what shall I write about?"

"Write about my music," said Pitou, whose compositions had been rejected in every arrondissement of Paris.

"Let us talk sanely," demurred de Fronsac. "My causerie is half a column short. Tell me something interesting."

"Woman!" replied Pitou.

De Fronsac flicked his cigarette ash. "You remind me," he said, "how much I need a love-affair; my sensibilities should be stimulated. To continue to write with fervour I require to adore again."

"It is very easy to adore," observed Pitou.

"Not at forty," lamented the other, "especially to a man in Class A. Don't forget, my young friend, that I have loved and been loved persistently for twenty-three years. I cannot adore a

repetition, and it is impossible for me to discover a new type."

"All of which I understand," said Pitou, "excepting 'Class A.'"

"There are three kinds of men," explained the poet. "Class A are the men to whom women inevitably surrender. Class B consists of those whom they trust by instinct and confide in on the second day; these men acquire an extensive knowledge of the sex — but they always fall short of winning the women for themselves. Class C women think of merely as 'the others' — they do not count; eventually they marry, and try to persuade their wives that they were devils of fellows when they were young. However, such reflections will not assist me to finish my causerie, for I wrote them all last week."

"Talking of women," remarked Pitou, "a little blond has come to live opposite our lodging. So far we have only bowed from our windows, but I have christened her 'Lynette,' and Tricotrin has made a poem about her. It is pathetic. The last verse — the others are not written yet — goes:

"'O window I watched in the days that are dead,
Are you watched by a lover to-day?
Are glimpses caught now of another blonde head
By the youth who lives over the way?
Does *she* repeat words that Lynette's lips have said —
And does *he* say what *I* used to say?'"

"What is the answer?" asked de Fronsac. "Is it a conundrum? In any case it is a poor substitute for half a column of prose in *La Voix*. How on earth am I to arrive at the bottom of the page? If I am short in my copy, I shall be short in my rent; if I am short in my rent, I shall be put out of doors; if I am put out of doors, I shall die of exposure. And much good it will do me that they erect a statue to me in the next generation! Upon my word, I would stand a dinner — at the two-franc place where you may eat all you can hold — if you could give me a subject."

"It happens," said Pitou, "that I can give you a very strange one. As I am going to a foreign land, I have been to the country to bid farewell to my parents; I came across an extraordinary girl."

"One who disliked presents?" inquired de Fronsac.

"I am not jesting. She is a dancer in a travelling circus. The flare and the drum wooed me one night, and I went in. As a circus, well, you may imagine — a tent in a fair. My fauteuil was a plank, and the orchestra surpassed the worst tortures of the Inquisition. And then, after the decrepit horses, and a mangy lion, a girl came into the ring, with the most marvellous eyes I have ever seen in a human face. They are green eyes, with golden lights in them."

"Really?" murmured the poet, "I have never

been loved by a girl who had green eyes with golden lights in them."

"I am glad you have never been loved by this one," returned the composer gravely; "she has a curious history. All her lovers, without exception, have committed suicide."

"What?" said de Fronsac, staring.

"It is very queer. One of them had just inherited a hundred thousand francs when he died — he hanged himself. Another — an author from Italy — took poison, while all Rome was reading his novel. To be infatuated by her, they say, is harmless enough, but to win her is invariably fatal within a few weeks. Some time ago she engaged herself to one of the troupe, and soon afterwards he learnt that she was deceiving him. He resolved to shoot her; he pointed a pistol at her breast. She simply laughed — and *looked at him*. He turned the pistol on himself, and blew his brains out!"

De Fronsac had already written: "Here is the extraordinary history of a girl whom I discovered in a fair." The next moment:

"But you repeat a rumour," he objected. "*La Voix Parisienne* has a reputation; odd as the fact may appear to you, people read it. If this is published in *La Voix* it will attract attention. Soon she will be promoted from a tent in a fair to a stage in Paris. Well, what happens? You tell me she is beautiful, so she will have hundreds of admirers.

Among the hundreds there will be one she favours. And then? Unless he committed suicide in a few weeks, the paper would be proved a liar. I should not be able to sleep of nights for fear he would not kill himself."

"My dear," exclaimed Pitou with emotion, would I add to your anxieties? Rather than you should be disturbed by anybody's living, let us dismiss the subject, and the dinner, and talk of my new Symphony. On the other hand, I fail to see that the paper's reputation is your affair — you are not married to it; and I am more than usually empty today."

"Your argument is sound," said de Fronsac. "Besides, the Editor refuses my poetry." And he wrote without cessation for ten minutes.

The two-franc table-d'hôte excelled itself that evening, and Pitou did ample justice to the menu.

Behold how capricious is the jade, Fame! The poet whose verses had left him obscure, accomplished in ten minutes a paragraph that fascinated all Paris. On the morrow people pointed it out to one another; the morning after, other journals referred to it; in the afternoon the Editor of *La Voix Parisienne* was importuned with questions. No one believed the story to be true, but not a soul could help wondering if it might be so.

When a day or two had passed, Pitou received a note from de Fronsac which ran:

"Send to me at once, I entreat thee, the name of that girl, and say where she can be found. The managers of three variety theatres of the first class have sought me out, and are eager to engage her."

"Decidedly," said Pitou. "I have mistaken my vocation — I ought to have been a novelist!" And he replied:

"The girl whose eyes suggested the story to me is called on the programmes 'Florozonde.' For the rest, I know nothing, except that thou didst offer a dinner and I was hungry."

However, when he had written this, he destroyed it.

"Though I am unappreciated myself, and shall probably conclude in the Morgue," he mused, "that is no excuse for my withholding prosperity from others. Doubtless the poor girl would rejoice to appear at three variety theatres of the first class, or even at one of them." He answered simply:

"Her name is 'Florozonde;' she will be found in a circus at Chartres" — and nearly suffocated with laughter.

Then a little later the papers announced that Mlle. Florozonde — whose love by a strange series of coincidences had always proved fatal — would be seen at La Coupole. Posters bearing the name of "Florozonde" — black on yellow — invaded the Boulevards. Her portrait caused crowds to assemble, and "That girl who, they say, deals death

— that Florozonde," was to be heard as constantly as *Hiawatha.*

By this time Pitou was in the Hague, his necessities having driven him into the employment of a Parisian who had opened a shop there for the sale of music and French pianos. When he read the Paris papers, Pitou trembled so violently that the onlookers thought he must have ague. Hilarity struggled with envy in his breast. "Ma foi!" he would say to himself, "it seems that my destiny is to create successes for others. Here am I, exiled, and condemned to play cadenzas all day in a piano warehouse, while she whom I invented, dances jubilant in Paris. I do not doubt that she breakfasts at Paillard's, and dines at Armenonville."

And it was a fact that Florozonde was the fashion. As regards her eyes, at any rate, the young man had not exaggerated more than was to be forgiven in an artist; her eyes were superb, supernatural; and now that the spangled finery of a fair was replaced by the most triumphant of audacities — now that a circus band had been exchanged for the orchestra of La Coupole — she danced as she had not danced before. You say that a gorgeous costume cannot improve a woman's dancing? Let a woman realise that you improve her appearance, and you improve everything that she can do.

Nevertheless one does not pretend that it was owing to her talent, or her costume, or the weird mel-

ody proposed by the *chef d'orchestre,* that she became the rage. Not at all. That was due to her reputation. Sceptics might smile, and murmur "Réclame!" but, again, nobody could say positively that the tragedies had not occurred. And above all, there were the eyes — it was conceded that a woman with eyes like that *ought* to be abnormal. La Coupole was thronged every night, and the stage door-keeper grew rich, so numerous were the daring spirits, coquetting with death, who tendered notes inviting the Fatal One to supper.

Somehow the suppers were rather dreary. The cause may have been that the guest was handicapped by circumstances — to be good company without discarding the fatal air was extremely difficult; also the cause may have been that the daring spirits felt their courage forsake them in a tête-à-tête; but it is certain that once when Florozonde drove home in the small hours to the tattered aunt who lived on her, she exclaimed violently that, "All this silly fake was giving her the hump, and that she wished she were 'on the road' again, with a jolly good fellow who was not afraid of her!"

Then the tattered aunt cooed to her, reminding her that little ducklings had run to her already roasted, and adding that she (the tattered aunt) had never heard of equal luck in all the years she had been in the show business.

"Ah, bah!" cried Florozonde. "It does not

please me to be treated as if I had scarlet fever. If I lean towards a man, he turns pale."

"Life is good," said her aunt philosophically, "and men have no wish to die for the sake of an embrace — remember your reputation! *Il faut souffrir pour être fatale.* Look at your salary, sweetie — and you have had nothing to do but hold your tongue! Oh, was anything ever heard like it? A miracle of *le bon Dieu!*"

"It was monsieur de Fronsac, the journalist, who started it," said Florozonde. "I supposed he had made it up, to give me a lift; but, *ma foi,* I think *he* half believes it, too! What can have put it in his head? I have a mind to ask him the next time he comes behind."

"What a madness!" exclaimed the old woman; "you might queer your pitch! Never, never perform a trick with a confederate when you can work alone; that is one of the first rules of life. If he thinks it is true, so much the better. Now get to bed, lovey, and think of pleasant things — what did you have for supper?"

Florozonde was correct in her surmise — de Fronsac did half believe it, and de Fronsac was accordingly much perturbed. Consider his dilemma! The nature of his pursuits had demanded a love-affair, and he had endeavoured conscientiously to comply, for the man was nothing if not an artist. But, as he had said to Pitou, he had loved so much,

and so many, that the thing was practically impossible for him. He was like the pastry-cook's boy who is habituated and bilious. Then suddenly a new type, which he had despaired of finding, was displayed. His curiosity awoke; and, fascinated in the first instance by her ghastly reputation, he was fascinated gradually by her physical charms. Again he found himself enslaved by a woman — and the woman, who owed her fame to his services, was clearly appreciative. But he had a strong objection to committing suicide.

His eagerness for her love was only equalled by his dread of what might happen if she gave it to him. Alternately he yearned and shuddered. On Monday he cried, "Idiot, to be frightened by such blague!" and on Tuesday he told himself, "All the same there may be something in it!"

It was thus tortured he paid his respects to Florozonde at the theatre on the evening after she complained to her aunt. She was in her dressing-room, making ready to go.

"You have danced divinely," he said to her. "There is no longer a programme at La Coupole — there is only 'Florozonde.'"

She smiled the mysterious smile that she was cultivating. "What have you been doing with yourself, monsieur? I have not seen you all the week."

De Fronsac sighed expressively. "At my age one has the wisdom to avoid temptation."

"May it not be rather unkind to temptation?" she suggested, raising her marvellous eyes.

De Fronsac drew a step back. "Also I have had a great deal to do," he added formally; "I am a busy man. For example, much as I should like to converse with you now —" But his resolution forsook him, and he was unable to say that he had only looked in for a minute.

"Much as you would like to converse with me —?" questioned Florozonde.

"I ought, by rights, to be seated at my desk," he concluded lamely.

"I am pleased that you are not seated at your desk," she said.

"Because?" murmured de Fronsac, with unspeakable emotions.

"Because I have never thanked you enough for your interest in me, and I want to tell you that I remember." She gave him her hand; he held it, battling with terror.

"Mademoiselle," he returned tremulously, "when I wrote the causerie you refer to, my interest in you was purely the interest of a journalist, so for that I do not deserve your thanks. But since I have had the honour to meet you I have experienced an interest altogether different; the interest of a man, of a — a —" Here his teeth chattered, and he paused.

"Of a what?" she asked softly, with a dreamy air.

"Of a friend," he muttered. A gust of fear had made the "friend" an iceberg. But her clasp tightened.

"I am glad!" she said. "Oh, you have been good to me, monsieur; and if, in spite of everything, I am sometimes sad, I am, at least, never ungrateful."

"You are sad?" faltered the vacillating victim. "Why?"

Her bosom rose. "Is success all a woman wants?"

"Ah!" exclaimed de Fronsac, in an impassioned quaver, "is that not life? To all of us there is the unattainable — to you, to me!"

"To you?" she murmured. Her eyes were transcendental. Admiration and alarm tore him in halves.

"In truth," he gasped, "I am the most miserable of men! What is genius, what is fame, when one is lonely and unloved?"

She moved impetuously closer — so close that the perfume of her hair intoxicated him. His heart seemed to knock against his ribs, and he felt the perspiration burst out on his brow. For an instant he hesitated — on the edge of his grave, he thought. Then he dropped her hand, and backed from her.

"But why should I bore you with my griefs?" he stammered. "Au revoir, mademoiselle!"

Outside the stage door he gave thanks for his self-control. Also, pale with the crisis, he registered an oath not to approach her again.

Meanwhile the expatriated Pitou had remained disconsolate. Though the people in the Hague spoke French, they said foreign things to him in it. He missed Montmartre — the interests of home. While he waxed eloquent to customers on the tone of pianos, or the sweetness of rival composers' melodies, he was envying Florozonde in Paris. Florozonde, whom he had created, obsessed the young man. In the evening he read about her in Van der Pyl's; on Sundays, when the tram carried him to drink beer at Scheveningen, he read about her in the Kurhaus. And then the unexpected happened. In this way:

Pitou was dischargd.

Few things could have surprised him more, and, to tell the truth, few things could have troubled him less. "It is better to starve in Paris than grow fat in Holland," he observed. He jingled his capital in his trouser-pocket, in fancy savoured his dinner cooking at Le Faisan d'Or, and sped from the piano shop as if it had been on fire.

The clock pointed to a quarter to six as Nicolas Pitou, composer, emerged from the Gare du Nord, and lightly swinging the valise that contained his

wardrobe, proceeded to look for a lodging. He had the luck to find his former room vacant. He kissed the concierge ardently — which took her breath away, since she was ill-favoured and most disagreeable — fared sumptuously for one franc fifty at Le Faisan d'Or — where he narrated adventures abroad that surpassed De Rougemont's — and went to La Coupole.

And there, jostled by the crowd, the poor fellow looked across the theatre at the triumphant woman he had invented — and fell in love with her.

One would have said there was more than the width of a theatre between them — one would have said the distance was interminable. Who in the audience could suspect that Florozonde would have been unknown but for a boy in the Promenoir?

Yes, he fell in love — with her beauty, her grace, perhaps also with the circumstances. The theatre rang with plaudits; the curtain hid her; and he went out, perspiring. He could not hope to speak to her to-night, but he was curious to see her when she left. He decided that on the morrow he would call upon de Fronsac, whom she doubtless knew now, and ask him for an introduction. Promising himself this, he reached the stage door — where de Fronsac, with trembling limbs, stood giving thanks for his self-control.

"My friend!" cried Pitou enthusiastically,

"how rejoiced I am to meet you!" and nearly wrung his hand off.

"*Aïe!* Gently!" expostulated de Fronsac, writhing. "*Aïe, aïe!* I did not know you loved me so much. So you are back from Sweden, hein?"

"Yes. I have not been there, but why should we argue about geography? What were you doing as I came up — reciting your poems? By the way, I have a favour to ask; I want you to introduce me to Florozonde."

"Never!" answered the poet firmly; "I have too much affection for you — I have just resolved not to see her again myself. Besides, I thought you knew her in the circus?"

"I never spoke to her there — I simply admired her from the plank. Come, take me inside, and present me."

"It is impossible," persisted de Fronsac; "I tell you I will not venture near her any more. Also, she is coming out — that is her coupé that you see waiting."

She came out as he spoke, and, affecting not to recognise him, moved rapidly towards the carriage. But this would not do for Pitou at all. "Mademoiselle!" he exclaimed, sweeping his hat nearly to the pavement.

"Yes, well?" she said sharply, turning.

"I have just begged my friend de Fronsac to present me to you, and he feared you might not

pardon his presumption. May I implore you to pardon mine?"

She smiled. There was the instant in which neither the man nor the woman knows who will speak next, nor what is to be said — the instant on which destinies hang. Pitou seized it:

"Mademoiselle, I returned to France only this evening. All the journey my thought was — to see you as soon as I arrived!"

"Your friend," she said, with a scornful glance towards de Fronsac, who sauntered gracefully away, "would warn you that you are rash."

"I am not afraid of his warning."

"Are you not afraid of *me?*"

"Afraid only that you will banish me too soon."

"Mon Dieu! then you must be the bravest man in Paris," she said.

"At any rate I am the luckiest for the moment."

Now it was a delightful change to Florozonde to meet a man who was not alarmed by her; and it pleased her to show de Fronsac that his cowardice had not left her inconsolable. She laughed loud enough for him to hear.

"I ought not to be affording you the luck," she answered. "I have friends waiting for me at the Café de Paris."

"I expected some such blow," said Pitou. "And how can I suppose you will disappoint your friends

in order to sup with me at Le Faisan d'Or instead?"

"Le —— ?" She was puzzled.

"Faisan d'Or."

"I do not know it."

"Nor would your coachman. We should walk there — and our supper would cost three francs, wine included."

"Is it an invitation?"

"It is a prayer."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Nicolas Pitou."

"Of Paris?"

"Of 'Bohemia.'"

"What do you do in it?"

"Hunger, and make music."

"Unsuccessful?"

"Not to-night!"

"Take me to Le Faisan d'Or," she said, and sent the carriage away.

De Fronsac, looking back as they departed, was distressed to see the young man risking his life.

At Le Faisan d'Or their entrance made a sensation. She removed her cloak, and Pitou arranged it over two chairs. Then she threw her gloves out of the way, in the bread-basket; and the waiter and the proprietor, and all the family, did homage to her toilette.

"Who would have supposed?" she smiled, and her smile forgot to be mysterious.

"That the restaurant would be so proud?"

"That I should be supping with you in it! Tell me, you had no hope of this on your journey? It was true about your journey, hein?"

"Oh, really! No, how could I hope? I went round after your dance simply to see you closer; and then I met de Fronsac; and then —"

"And then you were very cheeky. Answer! Why do I interest you? Because of what they say of me?"

"Not altogether."

"What else?"

"Because you are so beautiful. Answer! Why did you come to supper with me? To annoy some other fellow?"

"Not altogether."

"What else?"

"Because you were not frightened of me. Are you sure you are not frightened? Oh, remember, remember your horrible fate if I should like you too much!"

"It would be a thumping advertisement for you," said Pitou. "Let me urge you to try to secure it."

"Reckless boy!" she laughed. "Pour out some more wine. Oh, it is good, this! it is like old times. The strings of onions on the dear, dirty walls, and

the serviettes that are so nice and damp! It was in restaurants like this, if my salary was paid, I used to sup on fête days."

"And if it was not paid?"

"I supped in imagination. My dear, I have had a cigarette for a supper, and the grass for a bed. I have tramped by the caravan while the stars faded, and breakfasted on the drum in the tent. And you — on a bench in the Champs Elysées, hein?"

"It has occurred."

"And you watched the sun rise, and made music, and wished *you* could rise, too? I must hear your music some day. You shall write me a dance. Is it agreed?"

"The contract is already stamped," said Pitou.

"I am glad I met you — it is the best supper I have had in Paris. Why are you calculating the expenses on the back of the bill of fare?"

"I am not. I am composing your dance," said Pitou. "Don't speak for a minute, it will be sublime! Also it will be a souvenir when you have gone."

But she did not go for a long while. It was late when they left the Faisan d'Or, still talking — and there was always more to say. By this time Pitou did not merely love her beauty — he adored the woman. As for Florozonde, she no longer merely loved his courage — she approved the man.

Listen: he was young, fervid, and an artist; his

proposal was made before they reached her door-step, and she consented.

Their attachment was the talk of the town, and everybody waited to hear that Pitou had killed himself. (His name was widely known at last.) But weeks and months went by, Florozonde's protracted season came to an end, and still he looked radiantly well. Pitou was the most unpopular man in Paris.

In the Rue Dauphine, one day, he met de Fronsac.

"So you are still alive!" snarled the poet.

"Never better," declared Pitou. "It turns out," he added confidentially, "there was nothing in that story — it was all fudge."

"Evidently! I must congratulate you," said de Fronsac, looking bomb-shells.

V

A LETTER TO THE DUCHESS

"YOU said to me last night, Duchess, 'You are a great musician, Socoloski, but a great musician may be a great fool!' I had vexed you. If I should not know that, forgive me; perhaps it is common of me to recognise that I vexed you — I shall always be ignorant of the best manners. Pray be indulgent to my ignorance, pray let me write to you boldly, because I have something to say.

"But how difficult it is — I am a vulgarian, who can express himself only by his violin! I want to say that when you looked at me so kindly, I was not the dolt and ingrate that I seemed; I was very proud, very honoured. If I appeared insensible of your interest, it was because I had just been stricken by a grief which I dared not hint.

"I arrived at your house late last night. You will be revolted to learn what delayed me. When my recital was over, and I had escaped from the fashionable ladies who scrambled to kiss my hands, and pull buttons from my coat as keepsakes, I hurried to a minor music-hall to hear a girl in tinsel sing a trashy song. I hurried there because I loved her,

Duchess, and I had much to think of when I left. To understand what was in my heart when I reached your drawing-room, you must read my love-story from the beginning — my very vulgar love-story that will disgust you.

"Most of the things that you have seen about me in the papers were false — anecdotes invented by my agent. The public ask for anecdotes of their favourite artists, and it is business to give the public what they want. I generally play the music that they want, though it is seldom the music that I like best. I say that most of the things you have heard about me were false, but this much is true — my father was a peasant, and I have fiddled in a fair.

"I was happy. I have been told of artists who suffered agonies in their youth, always tortured by ambition, and dismayed by their obscurity. With me it was quite different. I was more joyous in a tent than I am now on the platforms. I even knew at the time that I was happy. That says much! Ungrateful, perhaps I sound to you? Still, I shall be frank.

"I was thirteen when I first heard the words, 'You will be famous.' I was on my way to buy some apples, and the discussion that detained me bored me a great deal. So ignorant was I, that I swear to you 'Fame' said no more to me than that one day I should fiddle with a roof of wood over

my head, and that storekeepers and farmers would spell my name from a bill at the doors.

"My patron had me educated. To him I owe, not only my position in the musical world, but the fact that I am able to write this letter. I shall not weary you by describing the years of study. When I began to understand what lay before me, my apprenticeship looked an endless martyrdom; more than once I was at the point of fleeing from it. There is, they say, a special department of Providence for the protection of fools; it is Providence, no wisdom of my own, I have to thank that I am not still a vagrant scraping to villagers among the show waggons. The plans mapped out for me succeeded in spite of myself; at last the time arrived when it was said, 'Now we will commence!'

"Of course, I had come to my senses before this. So far from hankering after the tents of my boyhood, I was ashamed to remember that I had ever played in them; so far from picturing Fame as the applause of shopkeepers in a shed, I thirsted for something more than the reception accorded me at my début. Ambition devoured me now. If I have the right to praise myself for anything, it is for the devotion with which I worked during the five years that followed.

"Well, I made a furore. Audiences rained roses on me and struggled to reach the platform. Great ladies invited me to their receptions, and bent their

eyes on me as if I were a god. I found it frightfully confusing; under my veneer, under my fashionable suit, I was still the peasant who had held his cap for coppers. I discovered that it was necessary for me to do more than master my art — that I was required to say interesting things to people who frightened me; my popularity suffered a little because I could not do it. The agent was furious at my bashfulness. 'You must speak to the ladies as if you were in love with them,' he told me; 'or if you cannot do that, be rude! Make an effect *somehow.* You answer as if you were a servant.'

"Many of my eccentric remarks that you have heard, Duchess, have been composed with difficulty, and practised with care. The world will not have us as we are. My agent often returns a portrait-poster of me to the printer, with the instructions, 'Put more *soul* into the eyes!'

"I am coming to my love-story. It was no further back than last year that I first met her. I had given a recital at Blithepoint, and was remaining there for a few days' rest. One evening I went to a variety entertainment in the pavilion on the pier.

"In the bill were three girls described as 'The Three Sisters Clicquot.' They appeared as theatre attendants — the programme sellers who show you to your box — and sang, to a rather plaintive air, that they once hoped to be 'stars' themselves.

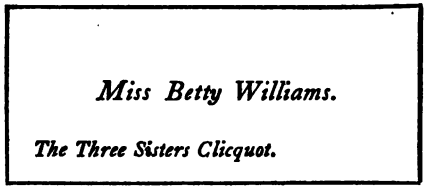
And then, having blossomed into gauze and spangles, they burlesqued melodrama. After their turn, two of the trio came into the stalls, and, by chance, I spoke to one of them; a Strong Man had broken a sixpence in halves, and thrown the pieces over the footlights — the girl asked me to let her see the piece that I picked up.

"I do not suppose I exchanged twenty words with her, and certainly I gave no thought to the incident; but a night or two later I drifted onto the pier again, and came face to face with her after the performance was over.

"She greeted me gaily. 'Hallo! Have you been in front?"

"'No,' I said; 'I am only strolling. Where are your sisters — are they really your sisters?'

"'Oh, no,' she answered. 'It's Nina Clicquot's show — good name to choose, eh? The other girl, Eva Jones, and I are engaged by her, that's all. This is my card.' From a battered purse she took a card on which was printed!



"We were near the entrance to the buffet. 'Will you come and have a drink?' I asked.

"'Oh, I don't think I will, thanks,' she said. 'I'm waiting for Eva — I might miss her.'

"'Oh, you'd better come,' I said.

"We went in and sat down at one of the tables. She did not strike me as particularly good-looking then; the spell of her face lay in its changefulness, and as yet I had not seen it change, for her capabilities as an actress were of the slightest. I saw merely a pale, slim girl, becomingly dressed in some dark stuff that was rather shabby; when she lifted her brandy-and-soda, a finger-tip showed through a glove. I wondered why I had brought her in, and was glad that there was no crowd to recognise me. It wasn't till she told me so that I was sure she recognised me herself.

"She said, 'I have never heard you play; I should love to! Did you get many people in down here?'

"I couldn't help smiling. Yet it had a pleasant ring, that question. It revived the past — the days when I used to see the takings divided on the drum.

"'Oh,' she exclaimed, laughing, 'I forgot! Of course, you did — I'm not used to talking to big guns.' But there was no embarrassment in her apology — she might have been living among 'big guns' all her life.

"'How long have you been at it?' I asked her.

"'The halls? Three years,' she said. 'I was on the stage for a little while, not that I was up to

much. I was the starving heroine once — the manager said I was the worst leading lady he had ever see, but that I "looked the part," because I was all bones. I *am* a skeleton, aren't I? I chucked the stage; the halls pay much better — and my voice isn't bad. Of course, it's not a trained voice, but it isn't bad, eh? We have two shows a night next week — that means five pounds to me. Good for little Betty!' By the way, she was not little.

"'What do you do with so much money?' One must say something.

"'Oh, I've plenty to do with it,' she said.

"'A husband to keep?'

"'Give us a chance!' she laughed. 'No, but mother doesn't make much by the shop any more — she's a costumier — and there are the kids to bring up — I've two young brothers. She did well once; I used to go up West, to try for engagements, dressed to kill — she lent me the models to put on. I often didn't have twopence in my pocket, but I looked a treat. The only thing was, I was so afraid of its raining — then we couldn't sell the model.'

"'You've had hard times?' I said, interested.

"She nodded gravely. 'Rough! I've always found very good pals, though. When I went into the chorus at the Regalia, I and a friend of mine hadn't a cent between us for 'bus fares; and there was an old Johnnie — one of the syndicate — who took to us. Quite straight! He said, "Look here,

I know you two girls aren't getting enough to eat; I've booked a table at the Troc, and you're both to lunch there right through the rehearsals. If you can't get away for lunch, it's to be dinner; but one square meal a day the two of you must have regularly, or there'll be rows. Mind, it isn't to be a meal for more than two!" Her face lit with laughter. "There were some boys in the chorus just as stony as we were; my friend would lunch one day, and I'd lunch the next — we'd each take a boy in turn! But the old man found out what was going on — and the Troc was off! . . . I've had cases of champagne sent me, if you please! He was a wine merchant's son — wanted to marry me; his screw in the business was about a pound a week. Nice little fellow. He always called me "Jack." He used to say, "I can't come in the pit to see the show to-night — I haven't got a bob; but have a case of champagne, Jack, I'll send you one round — it doesn't cost me anything!'"

"I liked it. For years I had conversed with only two kinds of women — the women who awed me, and the women who were awed. In five minutes I was as spontaneous as she. Her tones were, for the most part, very pleasant, and now that she was animated, the play of her features fascinated me. When we had finished our drinks we sauntered round and round the pavilion.

"'The performing birds are on,' she said, as we

caught the music; 'I hate that show, I hate an audience for standing it. Don't they know it's cruel? Performing birds make me think of the first bird you see die — you're a child, it's generally the first time you've looked at death. You bury your bird in the garden, and you line the grave with flowers, so that the horrid earth sha'n't touch it.' Her voice fell to a whisper.

"By the burst of applause that reached us in the moonlight I knew that the pavilion was packed.

"'That's Heracles, the Strong Man,' she said, as we listened again. 'What did you think of him? He's in love with my 'sister'— I mean Eva Jones. He wanted to kiss her, and she put on side — oh, Eva was very haughty! "Sir, how dare you?" He had hold of her finger, and he drew her to him as if she had been a piece of paper — it was so funny, to see her going! He worships the ground she walks on, fact! That was the reason his challenge night was a frost — didn't you hear about his challenge night? He bet that no twelve men in Blithepoint could pull him over the line. Then he got drunk, because she wouldn't have anything to do with him — and they pulled him all over the stage. It cost him ten pounds, besides his reputation. He cried! "Ah, little girl," he said to her, "it is all through you!"'

"It was amazing, that on the boards she could not act! As I heard her tell this story, I would

have sworn she was a born comédienne. The exaggerated dignity of Miss Jones, its ludicrous collapse, the humiliation of the Strong Man, she brought the scenes before me. 'Go on,' I begged, 'talk some more!'

"But before she could talk much more, the obdurate Miss Jones appeared. I was presented, and wished them 'Good-night.' I could have seen them to their lodging, but — well, Miss Jones's attire was not to my taste, and she had forgotten to take the 'make up' off her eyes.

"I am writing more than I intended; I had no idea that my explanation would be so long!

"The next night I did walk to their lodging with them. It was Saturday, their last night in the town; on Monday they were to sing in a London suburb. Miss Jones had to leave a parcel with an acquaintance at the Theatre Royal, and, in her absence, Betty Williams and I paced the street alone. A quarter of an hour, perhaps. She was looking forward to the week at home. She was serious tonight; she talked to me of her mother and the 'boys.' I said I hoped she would find them well; and we shook hands — 'Good-bye.' The incident seemed closed, but I went away with an impression I had never experienced before — the impression of having met someone who ought to have been my very good friend.

"When I breakfasted on the morrow, I felt

blank in realising that her train had already gone. Every day I had to combat a temptation to run up to that suburb. When my holiday came to an end, I wondered if she was in town still. By a music-hall paper, I ascertained that The Three Sisters Clicquot were in Derby. Each week I bought the paper to learn the movements of The Three Sisters Clicquot; and each week I told myself it would be absurd of me to follow her so far. Eventually, I followed her to Yorkshire!

"What a town! The grey grim streets, the clatter of the clogs, the women's hopeless faces under the shawls! I put up at a commercial hotel — there was nothing else — and was directed to the Empire.

"Their name was far down the programme: 'Number 10: The Three Sisters Clicquot.' I began to think that we should never reach it. Number 8 proved to be a conjuror, and my heart sank as I beheld the multitude of articles that he meant to use before he finished. Number 9 was a troupe of acrobats; a dozen times they made their bows and skipped off — only to skip on again and do some more. At last! The number '10' was displayed; the little plaintive symphony stole from the orchestra, the three girls filed on — Eva Jones, next Miss Clicquot, then Betty.

"I wondered if she would notice me. I saw her start — she smiled. I was so pleased that I had gone! We talked presently, in the passage under the stage. She was very much surprised; I did not tell her that I was there only to meet her again. Once more I walked with her and Eva Jones to their door. In the morning I called on them.

"I stayed in the place four or five days. There were luncheons in the private room that I had been able to secure at the hotel. I went to tea with them at their apartments. In fine, I was very much in love, and I knew that I had been a fool. I knew it for a reason which will be difficult for you to credit, Duchess; this girl, who took a brandy-and-soda with a stranger in a bar, who accepted little presents from others, and dined with men who had only one motive for inviting her, remained perfectly virtuous. In different classes there are different codes — she did not regard her behaviour as wrong; more, if she had committed the act which she knew to be wrong, she would have broken her heart. 'No matter how much a man cares for a girl,' she said to me once, 'he can't hold her any more sacred than she holds herself at the beginning. A girl saves herself for a man she is thinking of; she hasn't seen him — in all probability she never will see him; but she is saving herself for him — the imaginary man — from her head to her heels! . . . You tell me I "shouldn't do this," and I

" shouldn't do the other "— I don't do any harm. If you knew how dull it is on tour, you'd understand my taking all the fun I can get. When a fellow asks me to lunch, I go; I say I'll go with another girl — that tells him everything, doesn't it? I swear to God I've only let one man kiss me in my life — and then I only did it out of pity, because he was so cut up. A man is never dangerous till he's beaten. Do you know that?' Well, I wasn't prepared to marry her, and she could be nothing to me if I didn't; I left Yorkshire with the firm intention of never seeing her any more.

" However, I missed her dreadfully, and at the end of a month, I succumbed again. I went to Lancashire this time. The same impatience in my stall, the same quiver of expectancy at the plaintive introduction that was so familiar now, the same throb as the three girls appeared. Why should I bore you with details? I was with her all day, every day. Tea and chatter in the lodging became an institution, and we grew serious only when the melancholy dusk signalled her departure for the hall. She was not fascinated by her career: 'How I hate going in!' she murmured sometimes, as we reached the artists' entrance, with the group of loafers spitting on the kerb. And I sat in front, just to see the turn, and talked to her again between the first performance and the second — in the passage at the foot of the dirty steps, where such draughts

poured through the slamming door, and the gas-jet blew crooked in its cage.

"She was fond of me; I knew it. I had only to ask her to marry me — I knew that her consent wouldn't be due to my position. There were moments when I was very near to asking her. But I was Socoloski, and she — a third-rate variety artist. I shuddered to think what the Society ladies would say if their god stooped — for that matter, what everybody would say. No woman could have been more different from the wife I had pictured. Yet no woman had ever been so truly a companion to me. Always a bohemian at heart, I had naturally fallen in love with a bohemian; but when he draws a portrait of the wife that he desires, every man is conventional. Besides, you, and great ladies like you, had made me a snob. She drove with me to the station on the day I left. She knew I wouldn't go to her again — I heard it in her voice. That was the only time I felt dull when I was with her — we both could have said so much and were allowed to say so little. I remember the look in her eyes as the train crept from the platform. I shall always remember the look in her eyes as she smiled on the platform!

"Even a weak man may be strong sometimes — in the wrong place; I stuck to my resolve. At first, I still glanced at the *Encore,* just to know where she was, but before long I denied myself this too. For-

tunately, my American tour started soon afterwards. The change helped me while it lasted, but when I came back the struggle was as bad as ever. Six months had passed, yet every day I hungered to see her. I was desperate. I didn't know what to do to keep myself in hand.

"Duchess, my motive in addressing you is to write the truth, even the truths that one blushes to acknowledge. When I welcomed the dawn of your interest in me, I turned to you as a chance of forgetting *her* — I did not mean to prove so obtuse as I appeared last night. Perhaps, a gentleman might have seized the chance too, but, I suppose, only a cad would own it to you afterwards.

"And I couldn't forget! I never responded to your gaze without wishing it were hers. I resented the very gowns that you received me in, because *she* was poorly dressed. I hated myself for being in your drawing-room while *she* was trudging through the rain.

"My God! it's awful to think like that of a woman — to have the thought of her beset you as you open your eyes in the morning; to think till you're worn out with thinking of her, and pray to think of something else; to think of her till you want to escape from your own mind!

"Tolerate me a little longer — I have nearly done!

"Last Saturday, it was a year since I had seen

her. I broke down — I was ready to make her my wife. I wondered if she would look as pleased as she used to look when she saw me — and then I froze at the thought that The Sisters Clicquot might be abroad, that they might have vanished altogether. When I searched the *Encore* again, I — there were emotions!

"'The Three Sisters Cliquot!' I found it. They were in Portsmouth on Saturday; yesterday they were to be in town. It was impossible for me to go to Portsmouth; my prayer was that, after my recital yesterday, I might reach the London hall before she left. I had no means of knowing whether their turn would be late or early; all through that recital I was torn with the fear that I might miss her. The audience delayed me beyond endurance — I was trembling when I escaped from them. I stumbled into the carriage, and told the man to drive like mad.

"He couldn't find the stage-door, and, too impatient to keep still, I leapt out and went to the box-office. It was all right, they hadn't been on yet! There could be no chance to speak to her until the turn was over, so — just as I used to do — I sat down to wait in the stalls. Just as I used to do, I read the name of 'The Three Sisters Cliquot' in a programme, and wished that the preceding turn didn't last so long.

"I had taken it for granted that they would be

giving a different song now — and my heart tightened at the greeting of that familiar symphony again. For an instant I could not look at the stage. I knew, with my head bent, the moment when the three girls filed on; I knew where they were moving, how they were standing — now the note that they were going to sing! I looked up for Betty's face — and saw a stranger.

"Oh, the horrible woman, the low, horrible woman! And I had to watch her, I watched her in spite of myself. The audience laughed and shouted while I sat there with the sickness of terror in me, while I watched that horrible woman posturing in Betty's place, and wearing the frock that Betty had worn.

"Afterwards, I found the artists' entrance, as I had proposed to find it — only I asked for Eva, instead of Betty. She came down to me, smiling, in her stage costume.

"'Who'd have thought of seeing *you!*' she exclaimed, as we shook hands; 'I was just going to "change."'

"'How are you?' I said dully, and our eyes questioned each other.

"'I suppose you know about Betty?' she said.

"I could only look at her.

"'She's dead,' she told me.

"The last turn was on — a comedian was bel-

lowing doggerel. I listened to bars of it before I whispered, 'Dead?'

"'She got typhoid when we were in Lincoln — she died last month. Hadn't you heard?'

"'No. . . . It's still "The Three Sisters Cliquot" on the bills.'

"'Oh, yes, of course — it's always "The Three Sisters Clicquot." . . . The new girl's not as good as Betty was — do you think so?'

"'I don't know.'

"The comedian was dancing now — I heard the rattle of his feet. Shabby, pasty-faced men kept hurrying past us through the passage, up the dirty steps; the door at the top was slamming, and the gas-jet blew crooked in its cage. It was strange to be among these things and not see Betty.

"'Good-bye,' I said. 'Did she ever talk of me after I went?'

"Sometimes. She wasn't the girl to say much. Betty liked you, though.'

"'I liked Betty,' I said. . . . 'Well ——'

"'Well,' she said, 'I must get along and change. Buck up!'

"And then I went to you, your Grace; I had promised to play to your guests, and I could not break my word. But you may understand what I was feeling while I played — that my thoughts were in a grave. And when we were alone, you may un-

derstand that, though you are charming, and beautiful, and a duchess, and exalted me by your caprice, I could not be guilty of that — outrage, that adultery towards the dead.

"Most humbly I beg you to believe that I esteem the honour you have done a man who was unworthy — who was loyal neither to you nor her. You will never pardon me for this letter. Goodbye!"

VI

THE PRINCE IN THE FAIRY TALE

"The Carriage is at the door, Madam."

How strange that still sounds when the solemn butler says it — to me, Rosie McLeod! I go, wrapped in furs, down the great staircase, pass the two footmen — whose pomposity, if I may own the truth, rather frightens me — and enter my carriage in a dream. For a few minutes my grandeur seems unreal; I am remembering winters when I used to shiver in a spring jacket, and "japan" my summer straw. I feel as Cinderella must have felt on her way to the Ball, and, indeed, I hold my history no less fairy-like than hers, and my hero no less charming than her Prince. I want to write the tale, and to think that, far away in dear old England, other girls will read it. I ought to explain that I am writing in New York, a city that I never expected to see in all my life. But let me begin at the beginning!

The beginning, then, was a draughty flat in West Kensington. In looking back at it I see always a delicate, sweet-faced woman sitting by the fire, and

a dark slip of a girl sketching at a table covered by a faded green cloth. The woman was my mother; the girl was I. I know now that I had very little talent, but I meant to be an artist. When I sold my copy of "Shoeing the Bay Mare" one morning, while I was working at the National, I was prouder of myself than I have ever been since. Pray don't think I am vain of it; copies of that were rather easy to sell, and the girls in my time were accordingly eager for their turn to begin it; I only mention the matter because it was the first and the last money that my mother saw me earn. Dear little mother! But we were very happy together, weren't we, although we were poor? Dear little mother, if you were living to-day, what lovely, lovely things you should have! . . . .

At her death I was left quite alone. It is true that I had some second cousins, but I had not met them, and they showed no desire to meet me then. From one source and another I had about three hundred pounds, and in my ignorance I expected to support myself by my brush before the sum had melted. When I was free of the flat I took a lodging in Bayswater, and continued to study at a life-class. Excepting that I worked, and hoped, and very often cried, there is nothing to tell you of the next two years.

Then one afternoon I saw Miss Niblett in Kensington Gardens. She was an artist who had long

been an acquaintance of ours. As far back as I remember she used to drop in to tea about twice a year, and talk of the great things she was going to do. She never seemed to grow any older, nor to do the great things. She was a spirited, chirpy little woman, and when she settled in Paris both my mother and I had missed her occasional visits very much. In the Broad Walk she greeted me as brightly as ever, and we strolled to the Round Pond, and talked for an hour. She was returning in a week's time, and I heard that she was living there in the cheapest possible way, occupying a studio and bedroom in the quarter called "Montparnasse," and marketing and cooking for herself. She told me of the great things she was going to do.

"Why don't you come back with me, child?" she asked presently. "Come and study in Paris, and then you won't be so lonely. Wouldn't you like to?"

"I should love it," I faltered, with a heart-thump, "but ——"

"But, what?"

"I don't know. . . . For one thing, I can't speak French."

"Tut," cried Miss Niblett. "Hundreds of the girls don't speak French. You'll learn." For a minute we sat silent, gazing at the toy ships sailing across the pond. Then she added briskly, "You had better come!"

"All right," I said. And that was how I went.

Yes, I went to study in Paris, and to live in the queerest fashion imaginable. Our rooms were up ninety-eight stairs of a dingy house in a dilapidated court. At six o'clock in the morning the court used to wake, and be so exceedingly busy — and cheerful withal — that anyone there would have been ashamed to lie abed. To begin with, there was the rushing of water outside, for taps there were none, and one by one the tenants clattered to a pump with a bucket, to obtain their supply for the day. Then the hawkers made their appearance, each with his own peculiar chant. "Fine mackerel! Yes, fine mackerel! Who will buy my fine mackerel this morning?" And "Mussels! Oh, mussels most delicious!" And "Watercress;" and "Milk — some fresh milk?" And I mustn't forget the noise that was made by shaking out the rugs from every window. I have never seen a city that opens its eyes so good-humouredly as Paris. In pictures it is always shown to us at night with its myriad lamps shining, or in the afternoon when it is frivolous, and its fountains flash; but, in my own little unimportant opinion, if one would know Paris at its sweetest and its best, one should get up very, very early, and behold it smiling when it wakes to work.

I have told you that we lived up ninety-eight stairs; I must tell you something about the people who lived on the lower landings. Of course the

lower the landing, the higher the rent, but none of our neighbours had an air of opulence, need I say it? All of them bustled to the pump with pails, all of them cooked their own meals, and it was rather a rare occurrence, I believe, for everybody in that house to cook a dinner on the same day. On the floor below ours there was a Madame Troquet, who painted fans and chocolate boxes for a livelihood — the expensive and gorgeous boxes covered with satin, which fortunate people have sent to them at Christmas, and on their birthdays. Still lower there was an American youth who was studying Medicine. I am afraid he did not study it very hard; I should be sorry to think that if I were ill in America one day, he might be called in to prescribe for me. Lower still there were two young Frenchmen; one of them wrote verses, and his companion made sketches for some of the papers. And — there was another American, who had moved in while Miss Niblett was in London. So good-looking!

He was about seven-and-twenty, and, oh! he was shabby. It made my heart ache to see the threadbare clothes he wore, even there where I had come to take threadbare clothes for granted. I used to meet him at the pump sometimes, and then he always insisted on carrying my pail for me. I felt horrid to let him do it. I guessed he didn't have enough to eat and needed all his strength to drag his own pail up the stairs. Not that he showed any

signs of weakness. He would mount beside me as gaily as if he liked the work and the bucket were no more than a feather-weight. He seemed quite strong and happy, and —— I have told you how nice-looking he was, haven't I?

A girl cannot allow a young man to carry a pail of water up ninety-eight stairs for her without thanking him. I mean it was impossible for me *just* to say "Thank you," as if he had handed me the toast, or picked up my sunshade. Of course we spoke as we went up the stairs. He told me he was an art student, like me, and I thought that no poor young man had ever been more courageous and contented with his lot — if one call a little a "lot." He talked as if he loved the life. To listen to him one would have imagined that poverty — "bohemianism," *he* termed it — was a kind of treat — a privilege for the Select, like a ticket for the Royal Enclosure. I used to forget to pity him till I looked at his coat.

"I think you are very brave," I couldn't help saying once.

"Brave?" he exclaimed. "Why, how's that? Where's the hardship? I think it's just the right thing for a man to carry home his bread for breakfast, and dine for a franc when he's rich. It's glorious — teaches him to be independent. And you?" he went on in a different tone. "Is it very hard for *you?*"

"Oh, I am one of the wealthy — for the time being," I laughed. "I have quite a fortune as yet."

"What shall you do when you have squandered your millions?" People did not stand on ceremony with one another at our pump.

"Paint," I said.

"Nobody to help you?" he asked.

"My own right hand," said I.

He regarded it ruefully. "The prospect is not so charming as the hand," he murmured, "is it?"

"It's glorious," I declaimed, "for a girl to carry home her bread for breakfast, and dine for a franc when she's rich."

"No, it isn't," he said. "For a girl it's a different thing altogether. You'll excuse my contradicting you? Besides, even a franc wants earning when you have no allowance from home."

"I shall sell my Work," I declared valiantly. In those days I always spelt my work with a capital W.

"I guess pictures take a deal of selling sometimes."

"I suppose you mean that you don't think I shall ever paint well?"

"I haven't seen anything you have done," he answered; "how could I mean that? . . . Here we are at the top!"

We had reached our door, and Miss Niblett was standing there, a stiff little figure of disapproval.

Considering that I was only showing the young man simple civility in return for his extreme kindness, I am bound to say that Miss Niblett's later remarks were absurd. Miss Niblett said she should go downstairs with the pail herself in future.

When she came up the next morning I was all ears. Was she alone? . . . No, I could hear her speaking; and then there were steps, as someone turned away. "That Mr. Martin is certainly polite," she said, as she entered; "he insisted on bringing it up for me."

"*Who* did?" I inquired loftily.

"That Mr. Martin," she repeated. "Who else do you suppose would take the trouble?"

"Oh! *I* didn't know his name *was* 'Martin,'" I explained. "You seem to be on very friendly terms with him."

"Tut," said Miss Niblett. "Don't be ridiculous, child, and make haste with the coffee, do!"

Though I did not meet Mr. Martin at the pump any more, I very often chanced to meet him on my way home from the art school. Each time I liked him better, and of course I knew I wasn't doing all the liking myself. He never *said* anything, but a girl can always tell, can't she? When I heard of the shifts that some of the young men in the house were put to for a meal, and thought that *his* straits must be as cruel as any of them, I could have cried. There were moments when food almost choked me,

as I pictured him sitting half starved in his room, his chin sunk on his breast. I never saw him with his chin sunk on his breast — never despondent in any way — but I was sure his buoyancy was just put on to hide his sufferings.

When I had been livng in the court for about two months, the sight of his coat, and the idea of his privations, proved too bad to be borne. We had become such comrades by then — for the walk from the school took a long time, especially if one didn't walk very fast — that I thought he would let me speak like a sister to him.

"Mr. Martin," I murmured one day as we went home, "I want you to do me a great favour, please."

"Why certainly," he said. "Right now! What is it?"

"Well," I said, "we are both students, and we are very good friends, and it's all nonsense for you to reply that because I'm a girl you can't regard me as a real chum." And when I had stammered that, I turned red, and gazed at the tips of my shoes.

"But I haven't replied anything of the sort," he said, with a laugh; "I'm waiting to hear what you want me to do."

"You won't be offended?" I asked.

"I'm sure I could never be offended with *you*," he said earnestly.

"Or hurt?" I added.

"I'm sure *you* would never hurt me."

"Well, then, I want you to let me lend you a little money till things are better. Will you?"

His eyes widened at me; and then he — blushed. He did, he blushed; I saw the colour spread right up to his temples. I hated myself, though I had done my best to say it all delicately.

"I am very, very grateful to you," said Mr. Martin. "Believe me, I'm not in need of money. But you're a chum, indeed."

"Oh, you're too proud to confess," I gulped — and there was a lump that I couldn't swallow in my throat.

We were crossing one of the bridges, and I stopped and looked at the sun sinking, while I tried to blink my tears back. He stood there by me, and was quiet for a minute. When he spoke, I hardly recognised his voice, it trembled so much.

"Will you tell me something?" he whispered.

I nodded.

"Why did you say this to me?"

"Because I know you are poor, and *I'm* poor and can understand. But I could spare a small sum easily, and I thought you'd be great enough to let me help you."

"You *have* helped me," he answered; "helped me to ask you a question that I hadn't the pluck to put. . . . Dear little chum, do you care for me?"

"Yes," I told him.

"Enough to wait till a pauper can afford to marry you?"

"Yes," I told him.

"I love you," said Mr. Martin, "with all my heart!"

And the boats were sailing down the river, and a crowd was on the bridge, but I couldn't see them. In all Paris there was no one but ourselves. We were alone in the sunset — he and I!

I knew what Miss Niblett would say, and she said it — "Tut!" She warned me that I was doing a rash, an improvident thing. And after she had reproached herself for bringing me to France, and prophesied a hopeless waiting and the workhouse for me by turns, she hugged me splendidly, and wished me happiness. There you have Miss Niblett!

Then my fiancé was invited up to supper, and we were merry. I was annoyed to see that, while I was making the salad, she had examined him about his prospects. Of course I did see it, when I came back, by his embarrassed look and Miss Niblett's air of dissatisfaction. Still I repeat that we were merry that evening, although I couldn't help regretting that I had so often spoken to her of my fear that he didn't get enough to eat. It wasn't quite nice, while we sat at supper, to think she was reflecting that a substantial meal was by way of being a novelty to my lover. It hurt me, that.

Good little Miss Niblett! Though she had let me prepare the supper so that she might have a chance to pester him with questions, she made amends by clearing the things away herself. And shut the door behind her! That was the first time he kissed me. After all that has happened since, the scene remains clear and living to me — the little lamp-lit room, half studio, half parlour, the scent of the mignonette in the open window, and the Promised Land I saw beyond. When I am old and grey, it will be living to me still — his voice, his touch, and the joy that was singing in my heart.

And by-and-by we all went out. "I have pennies to spend," pleaded my lover, "let's be lavish!" Could I be wise on such a night? Away we sped from Montparnasse into the Paris where the cabs darted and the cafés glittered; and we had syrups and fizzy waters under the trees in the starlight, and made-believe that we were rich. I thought Miss Niblett must have been in love herself once upon a time — she was so tactful. It was a long ramble that we took. Like children we joked outside a jeweller's window, pretending to choose the costliest of engagement rings; like vagrants we loitered by a great house where a reception was being held. Yes, we stood there on the pavement and watched the grand people arriving; and for the first time for hours I remembered we were poor.

"Why aren't *we* going to a party? How lovely it would be!"

"Are you keen on parties?" my lover asked; "perhaps I could take you to one this week? Shall I try?"

"A party like that?" I laughed. "Yes, please!"

"Ah, well," he replied, "I can't guarantee that it will be quite like that. Still, I guess it will be rather fun. Will Miss Niblett go, too?"

"I?" she exclaimed. "Don't talk nonsense!"

"I wonder," he said, "which is the best place in this city to hire a suit of dress-clothes for the evening. My social gaieties have given me no cause to find out."

That was all. We turned homeward. I thought with Miss Niblett that he had been talking nonsense. Imagine how surprised I was to hear him revive the subject after a day or two.

"Well, it's all right," he said; "I've managed it. We're invited."

"Invited?" I echoed. "Invited where?"

"Why to the festivity to-morrow night."

"But," I cried, "you didn't really mean it, did you. You didn't suppose I'd go? The people are strangers to me."

"Oh, that's nothing," he answered. "In Society they often go to strangers' parties. It's rather chic."

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"Well, we aren't in Society," I reminded him. "I'm not chic. I can't go junketing with a lot of students I've never seen before."

"You'll never be a bohemian, Rosie," he said; "you don't seem to catch on to the tone of the Quarter at all. Now, do come! If you're a good girl you shall be rewarded. You see I have my clothes ready, and it would disappoint me some not to get a chance to show 'em off."

He made such a point of it that I promised. But I wasn't pleased. Besides being reluctant to intrude, I was annoyed at the thought of having put him to expense; also the idea of his going to a party in a hired suit was distasteful to me. I went to my school as cross as two sticks.

Early the next morning he ran upstairs in a great hurry to borrow our newspaper. I wondered why he wanted it, for he always read *Le Temps,* and we took the *Daily Messenger*, one of the English papers that were published in Paris. However, we were busy, and let him have it, though we hadn't looked at it ourselves yet. We were busy examining the white silk frock that I meant to wear. I was for freshening it with some new tulle, and Miss Niblett kept saying that it would be folly to spend the money. The argument lasted such a long time that I didn't go to the school at all that day. Miss Niblett won.

And then behold an afternoon of amazement!

As I was boiling the kettle, there came a rap at the door, and whom should I admit but a stylish young woman with a note and a large box! The note consisted of four words — "Frills for the Fairest!" and the box contained — a dress. But, my dears, a dress that I can't describe to you! I should need a page to do it justice; such a dress as the fairy godmother might have created when she changed a pumpkin to a chariot.

"What does it mean?" I gasped.

"Is that from him?" stammered Miss Niblett.

"Oh, don't you know it's from him?" I cried hotly. "Now I see why you wouldn't let me buy the tulle! But how can he have paid for it, and how could you encourage him?"

I thought she was going to cry. "Rosie," she whimpered, "he told me he wanted to give you a dress, and asked me to help him, but I never imagined he meant a dress like that; I didn't indeed! How could I? Oh, my child, look at the name on the lid — look where it comes from!"

"Mademoiselle will try it on?" suggested the young woman coolly.

"*What* does she say?" I demanded. She spoke French, of course. It is to be hoped she didn't understand English.

"She says you had better try it on."

"This is madness," I faltered. I looked from the young woman to Miss Niblett; I looked from

Miss Niblett back to the frock. "Madness!" I repeated — and tried it on. Oh, what a frock! There were exclamations, and pins, and stitches. And in the middle of it all came another bang at the door.

A porter in uniform stood on the landing. He, too, bore a note and a box; he, too, behaved as if miracles happened every day in the year.

Four words again — "Suède for the Sweetest!"

Gloves, if you please! — a stack of them, with I can't tell you how many buttons, and the faintest odour of violets. I know now that in the whole of Paris there is only one shop that sells gloves quite like those; and that they are famous all over the world.

A knock at the door! By this time we opened it speechlessly — we just glanced at each other, and tottered. And again four words — "Bonds for the Best." I tore off the brown paper with hands that shook. Under the brown paper, tissue paper; under the tissue paper, the glint of velvet, pale blue; I drew out a jewel case; I pressed a spring, and —

"Oh, gracious!" screamed Miss Niblett.

Shimmering on the satin with which the case was lined lay a "rope" of pearls fit for an empress. Not even a string — a "rope!" Three times round the neck it would wind, and hang almost to the waist. We fell onto the sofa, dazed.

"Are they real?" Miss Niblett panted. "Oh,

my dear! Give me the case. My dear! They *are* real, I'm sure they are. Oh, my dear! they must be worth thousands upon thousands of pounds. What *does* it all mean?"

And for the rest of the day not a glimpse of my fiancé, not a message from him. Monsieur Martin was out, the concierge told us when we inquired. It had been arranged that he should come for me at ten o'clock, and at half-past eight I began to dress. We lit every candle in the flat that evening. At five minutes to ten I was ready — all but one glove. We sat trembling with curiosity. Then we heard him — singing on the stairs; and he tapped as the hour struck.

"Now!" we both cried. "Perhaps you'll explain?"

If his clothes weren't his own, he had discovered a remarkable establishment; I noted that, despite my dizziness. I fancy I have mentioned how nice-looking he was, but I had never really done him justice before. He was worthy to take his frock out. He stood there admiringly, presenting a bouquet.

"Explain?" he murmured. "Oh, you mean those things I sent you? My dear ladies, patience is one of the most beautiful of virtues — let us cultivate it! Rosie, you're a dream of loveliness! I thought perhaps you'd like a few flowers. Shall we go?"

And we went. I had expected to see a cab at the corner; there was a brougham, with a footman waiting on the curb.

"Not mine," said the Man of Mystery, "I assure you. Hired!"

"Like your clothes?" I flashed.

"Much more so," he said serenely. "Would you prefer the window up, or down, dear?"

"Either," I said, "if you'll tell me where we're going."

"Why, to the party," he replied; "I thought you knew."

"You don't ask me to believe we're going to a student's supper, dressed like this?"

"Well, no," he said. "I guess we'd be a trifle overpowering, eh? But I never told you it was a student's supper. That student was an invention of your own."

We rolled along luxuriously. To my bewilderment, it seemed that all the capital was astir that night. Crowds, crowds everywhere in the brilliant streets — Paris was a panorama of lights and faces. After a while we began to move more slowly, other vehicles impeded us. I could hear the jangling of horses' bits, the orders of the police.

"We're drawing close," said my lover.

The clatter of hoofs was to right and left of us now. From the window I saw the glare of carriage lamps, caught glimpses of great ladies' gowns

and jewelled heads. The brougham swung through gates into a courtyard.

"We are there," said my lover.

I stood on the steps of a palace. On either side of me soldiers were drawn up, startling, spectacular. Music swelled through the doorway. Flunkeys bowed at our approach.

"Where have you brought me?" I whispered. "Whose house is this?"

"He's called the President of the French Republic," was the answer. "Don't be shy."

We passed through the dazzle of the hall. The lights blinded me, and the scent of the roses was very strong. I heard great names spoken, names that made me catch my breath. As those awe-inspiring names were uttered, the scene became more and more unreal. And the guests, the guests who bore the historical names, looked quite ordinary, prick-me-and-I-shall-bleed persons. I think that was the most vivid impression I had in the Elysée — the difference between the persons and their names.

Soon through the throng — among the regal toilettes of the women, and the groups of distinguished, "decorated" men — I grew conscious of the figure of an elderly gentleman, with iron-grey hair and a rather sad smile, moving near to us. I recognised him by photographs that I had seen — and I knew it was the President himself.

"Now," said the voice at my side, "I'm going to present you to him. Try to look as if you liked it."

For an instant I saw the other end of the glittering salon turning very, very small and dim, and I thought I was going to faint. I hadn't the slightest notion whether I ought to put out my hand to him, or kiss *his* hand, or sweep a curtsey. And if you want to know which of the three I did, I'm unable to tell you; but my lover affirmed afterwards that I was "real charming" — and you may take his word for it, if you are kind enough. I can't pretend that it convinces *me,* for I never felt such a gawk in all my days.

I don't know how long we stayed at the Elysée; I have a vague recollection of eating an ice. But the next thing I remember clearly is our entering the brougham again, and driving away into the fresh sweet air. Then I leant towards him.

I said, "If you've any consideration for me, you'll answer right off and tell me whether I'm awake or asleep. I have pinched myself three times, and I'm still not sure."

"You darling!" he laughed. "I was afraid you'd read it all before I confessed; that was why I stole your newspaper."

"So you did!" I exclaimed. "Why are you in the paper?"

"Well, you see, Rosie Posie, I bought those

pearls for you yesterday," he said, "and I had to get the bank to identify me; I suppose the jewellers chattered last night." He took the paper from his overcoat, and there, if you can believe me, by the light of the little electric lamp over our heads, this is what I saw:

"AN AMERICAN MILLIONAIRE'S SON IN MONTPARNASSE!

MR. MARTIN MCLEOD PLAYS AT POVERTY!!

THE EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIMENT OF A YOUNG CRŒSUS!!!"

After that, what remains for me to tell you? What his father said? Well, his father didn't object to me a bit, and always declares that Martin's marriage was the most sensible action of his life. Though that's nonsense! We spend six months of the year in America, and the other six in Europe. Miss Niblett is still in Paris. I am afraid she will never do the "great things," but she will never be hard up any more, for my "prince" is as generous as he is rich. The story I have tried to write is finished. *Isn't* it as marvellous as any fairy tale? But it is true! And I wonder if any other woman has ever been so blessed as I, and thank God for my great happiness.

" The carriage is at the door, Madam."

Oh, is it indeed? Well, I am not going out just yet, for there is a little girl running across the room to say that " Mother has been writing long enough, and must come and play." And there's Martie — Martie with his arm round me, looking down in my face.

VII

THE THIRD M

OTTO VAN NORDEN wrote ballads that were popular; but to attain this eminence he had, in his youth, sacrificed commercial prospects which might easily have provided him with wealth. So he often lamented his choice of a career as a terrible mistake. Nevertheless, as he had some private means, his life was no martyrdom, though he aspired vainly to a mansion and a motor. He had pleasant rooms, a good tailor, was frequently to be seen at the second-best restaurants, and spent as much of his time as possible on the Continent. It was, indeed, Van Norden who shocked the owner of a Confession-book by describing his favourite pastime as "Leaving England," and his pet aversion as "Coming back to it."

At the age of forty he fell seriously in love. He was a selfish man, though he inclined to lyrics like "Heaven were a Void without Thee," and "My Life for My Lady's Glove," and he battled against the temptation bravely. Violet was young, captivating, and sang his ballads with considerable expression — he had really no chance. He took a

wife, and a villa in Dulwich; and if the music pirates hadn't begun to be so industrious, it is possible that he might have escaped regret, even in the suburb that looks like a cemetery.

To write popular songs in a country where stolen music was exposed for sale on every kerbstone buttered no parsnips; and for matrimony the composer's private means were a tight fit. Not many quarter-days had elapsed before he felt that his marriage had been as big a blunder as his profession. "Music and marriage!" sighed Van Norden to the long, sad, empty roads of Dulwich; "but for music and marriage how well off I might have been!" And then it struck him that both the calamities of his life begun with an M.

Some men might have attached no importance to it; Otto Van Norden was impressed. He said that it was queer, this recurrence of the initial "M"—he was of the opinion that it "meant something." Perhaps there was a warning to be derived? Yes, that must be it! If a third catastrophe occurred, doubtless the third, too, would be alliterative—and perhaps fatal. M was evidently an initial ominous to him, an initial to be shunned. From that moment he grew nervous of things beginning with an initial M. He abandoned the wish to revisit Mentone; and he would not have attempted a march if his publishers had begged for one.

More quarter-days flashed by, and meanwhile his

fortunes remained unchanged. Self-respecting citizens still bought the stolen music, the private income was still a tight fight, and Dulwich was still the most melancholy of the suburbs. Then, when he had been married for three annual rentals, and a water-rate over, hopes were entertained of a son and heir — and Violet suggested calling him "Marmaduke." The composer was profoundly agitated; her proposal was no caprice — she had an uncle Marmaduke with money — and Van Norden knew very well that opposition must appear to her unreasonable, since he could not explain it without hurting her feelings.

He contested the point with tact. Kindly, but firmly, he disparaged the name of "Marmaduke" for months, all through the spring in fact. It was a name, he pointed out, more adapted to an elderly gentleman of portly presence than to a baby. It was not a tractable name, not amenable to abbreviation. Assuming that the child had a sensitive disposition, Violet would condemn him to years of suffering, for a boy who was christened "Marmaduke" would, when he went to school, certainly be called "Marmalade." The last argument was at once successful; Violet's eyes filled with tears, and as she thanked her husband for sparing the "poor little fellow" the consequences of her thoughtlessness, the composer's relief was deeper than any who mock presentiments can understand.

This was the first "M" that had menaced him since he perceived the significance of the initial to him, and nothing else noteworthy occurred until November. One day in November, when a pink-and-white bassinette was in readiness for the "little fellow's" advent, the master of the house awoke feeling as if he had a marble under his tongue. He did not mention the matter to Violet, but breakfasting with such an unfamiliar mouth was so discomfiting that he sent the servant up to Dr. Lachlan with a request to him to look in during the morning.

"I don't know what's happened to my mouth, Lachlan," he said; "it's for all the world as if a marble had rolled underneath the tongue in the night."

"Let us have a look at it," said the medical man. "Ah! Yes! Y-e-s, that hasn't come in the night — it's been coming for some time."

"Is it serious?"

"No, not necessarily. It wants removing."

"Removing?" echoed Van Norden. "What do you mean by 'removing' — you don't mean 'operating?' Don't you think a — a good lotion —?"

"Oh, no, we shall have to operate," said Dr. Lachlan. "You may put it at the morning after next. Meantime, I'll get a competent anæsthetist, and arrange about a nurse for you."

"But — but it's very serious indeed," faltered

the composer, dismayed. "Am I sure to get better? People sink under operations; we know that an operation is always 'performed successfully,' but the patient often dies the next day. What's the matter with me, what have I got?"

"It's what we call 'Myxoma.'"

"My God!" exclaimed Van Norden. "It begins with an M!"

He was now intensely alarmed for himself. He was also alarmed lest the news reached the ears of Violet, who was in no condition to be told such things. However, on the next morning but one she was unable to rise, so the preliminaries passed unnoticed by her. In a room on the first floor, Madame awaited the arrival of the son and heir; in a room on the second, Monsieur awaited the arrival of the surgeon. Few circumstances could have been more averse to marital tranquillity; few circumstances therefore could have been less favourable to the operation.

The first person to tap at the second-floor door was the nurse engaged by Dr. Lachlan.

"Good morning, nurse," said Van Norden. "Nobody has come yet; sit down, make yourself at home."

"Thank you," said the nurse. She added sympathetically, putting on her apron. "It's a trying time for you, I hear, what with one thing and another, sir?"

Lachlan came in, as blithely as if it were a party. "Well, how are we this morning?" he asked. "Good spirits? That's right! You'll be glad you've had this done — you'll feel much better, once it's over.—Ah, here's the man I'm waiting for! 'Morning, Major."

"Er, Dr. Major, pleased to meet you," murmured the composer, feebly untruthful. Already the bedroom was taking a strange aspect to him, the aspect of a hospital. Bandages and bottles seemed to have sprung from nowhere. Lachlan poured fluids briskly in basins before the window, and Major set out mysterious articles from a black bag on the chest of drawers. The paraphernalia spread incessantly, and the nurse continued, as if by magic, to produce sheets, and cans of hot water without having quitted the room.

"I think we'll move the bed, nurse," said Lachlan, and they pulled it into the middle of the floor. The anæsthetist felt the patient's pulse, and applied the stethoscope; and Van Norden noticed for the first time that the pattern of the wall-paper resembled pink mushrooms in bunches of vermicelli.

An oppressive "tent" was placed over his mouth. He felt very helpless, very childish all at once. The vapour of the "A.C.E." grew suffocating; his heart began to thump as if it would burst. He signalled the danger to Lachlan, and Lachlan gave a nod. Van Norden glared impotently — he was

sure that he was the victim of a blunder, that this pounding of the heart was too violent to be safe. Now there was a roaring in his ears. The idiots were killing him — and he was gagged, defenceless! Momentarily he was faint with terror, and then a lethargy which he mistook for courage stole through him; it surprised him to perceive with what stoicism he confronted death. Yes, he was listless! After all, it was not unpleasant. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered. Nothing mattered in the least.

His next impression was of being very cramped. On the horizon of his consciousness lurked the remembrance of the operation, and he assumed vaguely that it was over. He lay waiting to be congratulated, wondering why nobody spoke to him. Had he been left alone? He felt so bewilderingly limp that he couldn't turn, but he opened his mouth to say, "Are you there, Lachlan?" and to his horror, emitted nothing but a baby's bleat. His mouth remained open with amazement, and gigantic fingers suddenly thrust something sickening into it, while an unfamiliar voice made ridiculous noises at him.

Consternation held Van Norden spellbound. There were seconds in which he feared that he was insane. Presently another thought assailed him, one so startling that his blood ran cold. Minutes passed, minutes too terrible for words to paint. He gathered the fortitude to examine as much as was

exposed of his person — the hands belonging to him were minute, the hands of an infant! He stared at them aghast and shuddering. There could be no doubt of it — he had died under the operation, and had been born again. All that was natural enough, but the unforeseen and fearful thing was that he still remembered.

He was once more a baby. Whose? The immense import of the question throbbed in him. Where he lay he could see no more of the room than the ceiling, and he was unable to judge whether he had been reincarnated in a mansion or a hovel. There had been a royal princess expecting a baby, he reflected. "Great Scotland Yard!" thought Van Norden, "suppose I'm Royalty this time?" But the remaining pessimism in him rejected the fancy almost as it rose. "Too good to be true!" he mused, "I expect my father's a beggarly artist, or a curate — I don't suppose I'm even an only child! It's a ghastly situation — I wonder at what age one begins to forget?"

The woman with the gigantic fingers — or fingers comparatively gigantic — was speaking to someone now, and Van Norden listened intently, in the hope of ascertaining something of his prospects.

"Yes," said the woman, "and her, too, poor soul — don't know anything about it yet of course! They won't tell her for days. He died a moment before the mite was born. Wrote songs and such

like! Yes, they say the operation was quite successful, but he didn't rally — too weak, you know. Oh, awfully sad!"

"Grant me patience!" thought Van Norden; "I might have known it — I'm in that damned house in Dulwich still!"

"A quiet little thing, poor orphan, ain't it?" the monthly nurse went on; and then she leant over the cradle, and made the ridiculous noise at him again. In a burst of fury, Van Norden tried to swear at her, but he could produce only the baby's bleat. He yearned to be quiet, to be left undisturbed — there was so much to consider. He had allowed his life-policy to lapse, and now he bitterly repented the false economy. He wondered what the furniture would fetch, and if Violet would be enabled to bring him up properly. Perhaps his father-in-law would come to her assistance? — his "grandfather," he ought to say now! It would be a pretty kettle of fish if his widow — that was to say his "mother" — were left to her own resources. What would become of him? A board school, and a junior clerkship! "I suppose it's entirely problematical whether I shall even inherit my musical talent?" mused the unhappy infant. "It's a nice look-out for me, I must say!"

"But there," added the woman, "a girl baby always does keep quieter than a boy — I'm always thankful to see it a girl. Ookytooky, then! Ain't

I, my precious? Lor, the blessed lamb's choking!"

Van Norden had indeed turned purple in the face. A girl. Culminating calamity, a girl! The blankness of the girl's outlook, the poverty of the marriage that she must expect to make, was overwhelming. "Why," Van Norden asked herself passionately, "*why* has this thing happened to me? Among all the births that were taking place in the world, couldn't they have spared me a decent one? I don't harp on a palace, but, say, reasonable advantages? Opulent people are having sons every minute, yet *I* must go as the daughter of a widow in straitened circumstances. Upon my soul, it's heartrending!"

However, when she and Violet met again she was somewhat consoled by the warmth of her mother's welcome; and after the news of the bereavement was broken, the young widow cooed so tenderly of the manifold virtues of "darling papa" that Van Norden was quite touched. "A good sort!" meditated Van Norden, as Violet joggled her up and down; "I had no idea at the time that she appreciated me so much."

In hours of comparative resignation there was nothing more fascinating to Van Norden, while she lay in the pink-and-white bassinette, than to mark the development of her new identity — the process by which the trivial pains and pleasures of the moment attained supreme importance, and the pressing

anxieties which beset her at the hour of her birth became gradually blurred. The fact would have appeared incredible to the baby formerly had she heard with how little fret and jar the human mind adapted itself to another form and sex; she would not have believed the Ego could renounce so easily its interest in many matters, which, to its previous incarnation, had been absorbing. And doubtless, she reflected, she would disbelieve it again later!

Her attitude towards the bottle, for instance, fascinated her extremely. At first she had regarded it with disdain. Even when she recognised its suitability to her physical needs, she had merely tolerated the thing as a disagreeable necessity. This contempt, this suction under protest, was very brief. Soon she grew to relish the bottle, to clamour for it when it was late. Then, too, she was able to extract amusement from a coral-and-bells, and was again engrossed by the ticking of a watch. "Marvellous!" thought Van Norden, while she hovered at the parting of the ways, "marvellous thing, Nature, upon my word!" But, a trifle humiliated at moments like these, she would throw the coral, or watch, on the floor, and set up a howl. The devoted Violet often mistook the humiliation for a pin, and undressed her — an indignity which annoyed Van Norden more still.

Before she was six weeks old Van Norden had ceased to consider the financial position, and ac-

cepted without questioning who provided; she began to yield to the charm of the bottle and the watch unreservedly, and had scarcely a remaining care. Only while she plucked at Violet's crape, the past whispered in her, and a dim consciousness that the relations between her mother and herself were involved clouded the infantile brow.

"What's she thinking about, a love?" Violet would murmur, swaying her to and fro. "Doesn't she look worried, a pet!" And from the lap that was once Van Norden's wife's, Van Norden would raise great eyes to her solemnly.

When eight or nine months had passed, this glimmer of memory, which had then become nearly extinct, was fanned to ardour by a painful circumstance. They had gone to Dieppe with Violet's parents, and in the hotel Violet made the acquaintance of a Major somebody. The acquaintance had progressed when Van Norden was first brought in contact with him in the garden, and the gentleman paid the pretty widow marked attentions, and grinned at her baby propitiatingly.

"Jolly little chap," remarked the Major, worrying Van Norden with a forefinger.

"It's a little girl, Major," said Violet, smiling reproval.

"Oh confound it all! I mean, how stupid of me!" faltered the Major. "Lovely little thing, anyhow. I suppose you're awfully proud of her,

Mrs. Van Norden, eh? The only pebble on the beach, what? It seems awfully rum to see you with a baby, though — you look such a girl, don't you know."

"What nonsense!" said Violet, blushing; "I'm an elderly woman if one counts one's age by one's troubles." She glanced significantly at her weeds, and sighed.

"Oh, ah, of course I understand; I — I can sympathise, I can indeed. But you shouldn't think of your troubles too much, Mrs. Van Norden, if I may say so — you should buck up. Life, after all is ——" He struggled with his eyeglass and failed to enunciate his sentiments on life.

"Life is very, very strange," said Violet, gazing pensively at the sea.

"Isn't it?" said the Major eagerly. "Just fancy, it's only a week since I met you, what?"

"Oh, I wasn't thinking of that," she murmured.

"*I* am," said the Major, "I think of it lots. It seems so rum, don't you know, that I'd never seen you till a week ago. Don't you think that sometimes people meet who were meant to meet, and that, for them, a week scores more than years and years of society between people who er — well, who only happen to meet because they're introduced, don't you know?"

Van Norden lay communing with herself. In the little brain the voice of the past cried for recog-

nition. She eyed the adults darkly, agitated by the sense of a tragedy which she sought piteously to define. The soul of the baby sprawling on the cushions was symptomatic of marital jealousy, though the mind failed to diagnose the disease. Distressed and puzzled, Van Norden burst into startling screams, and kicked her little limbs about furiously. Violet was unable to pacify her, and much alarmed, was about to dispatch the Major for the nurse when, through the windows of the salon, came the prelude to a song, and someone began to sing "Heaven were a Void without Thee." The baby's paroxysm ceased almost at once; her gaze grew wide. Striking her ear when it did, the ballad that she had created in her preceding incarnation revivified her consciousness of the former life. The veil was rent; the female infant was at heart a husband — and looking in the faces of Violet and her new lover, Van Norden remembered all.

She could say nothing — speech was not yet granted to her — could not proclaim, "I am Otto," though she beheld her widow wooed by another man. Life holds no moment more terrible than an experience like this. Nor did her agony fade with her banishment from the scene. On the contrary, her helplessness intensified her sufferings; too young as yet to toddle, incapable of intruding where she wished, Van Norden was constantly racked by tortures of the imagination. Consumed with jealousy,

and craving to be in the salon, she was compelled to lie fuming in her cot — or was strapped in her perambulator while her frenzied fancy followed Violet and the Major into the Casino.

Soon she employed the only weapon in her power, and kicked and screamed as often as an attempt was made to remove her from Violet's presence. By this means she witnessed much that would otherwise have been hidden from her, was indeed a witness of her successor's proposal. Stricken with resentment, the babe that had once been the widow's husband lay in her lap while the Major begged her to be his wife.

"I know it's a bit early for me to speak," he stammered, "but I can't help it — if I let you go away without telling you how much I care for you, I might never see you again. Only give me a word — I'll wait. I'll be as patient as I can, but tell me that there's a chance for me."

She was silent a long while; evidently she was much moved. At last she murmured, "I don't know what to say."

"Can't you care a bit for me?"

"Ah, it isn't that!" she owned tearfully.

"Darling! Dearest!"

"Sh!" she said, "you oughtn't. It's so soon; and — oh, I don't know, there's so much to consider. There's my child." She clasped Van Norden protectively.

"You don't suppose I'd be rough on it?" cried the Major. "Why, I give you my word — just as if it were my own. Violet, in a few months' time? Will you marry me in a few months' time?"

He leant lower, and she raised her gaze; the next instant they had kissed across Van Norden's head. All the rekindled manhood in the infant's consciousness flamed to avenge the outrage, burned to strike the supplanter down, to destroy him. The disparity between the virile impulse and the tiny frame was maddening. Purpling with shame and indignation, Van Norden reared to spit at him, but could only dribble.

No child of nine months is capable of supporting such a mental strain. Soon afterwards Violet had to send in hot haste for a medical man. He spoke gravely of removing something from the brain.

"'Removing' something? You don't mean 'operating?'"

"Yes, we shall have to operate," answered the doctor, and Van Norden was kept in her cot.

There was a morning when a trained nurse came to her side putting on an apron, and the surgeon followed. Violet and the Major were present, the Major soothing her.

"I think we'll move the bed," said the surgeon, and Van Norden lay staring through the window at the brilliant sky.

The room began to acquire a novel air. The

nurse produced sheets and cans of hot water from nowhere; the surgeon poured fluids in basins briskly. The Major set out mysterious articles from a black bag on the chest of drawers. The sky developed a pattern of pink mushrooms and bunches of vermicelli — and Van Norden came to his senses.

He saw Lachlan looking at him.

"Well, how do you feel?" asked Lachlan. "We've got rid of your Myxoma for you. And your wife's first-rate. You've a little son waiting downstairs — fine boy, too!"

"Fine boy?" murmured the composer drowsily, "no, I was a fine girl."

"Not quite come round yet, nurse," said Lachlan; "let him sleep the rest of it off, and he'll be as right as rain!"

VIII

THE BISHOP'S COMEDY

I

THE Bishop of Westborough had seldom found himself in a more delicate position. Since Sweetbay objected so strenuously to its rector being a dramatist, Sweetbay was clearly no place for the Rector; and it devolved upon his Lordship to intimate the fact. But secretly his Lordship was also guilty of dramatic authorship, and instalments of his comedy were even now in the hands of that accomplished actress, Miss Kitty Clarges. For this reason, and another, the Bishop had wakeful nights.

However, he did what was required. With all his customary blandness, and perhaps a shade more, he pointed out to the Rev. Baker Barling that the parish of Sweetbay was unsuitable for him, and offered him instead a living which commended itself to the Barlings not at all. Indeed, Mrs. Baker Barling was so highly incensed by the removal, that the Rector had on several occasions to say "My dear!" to her reprovingly.

The Bishop was young for a bishop. His clas-

sical features, and the dignity of his carriage, would have compelled attention even if he had been a mere man. He never said anything noteworthy, but he voiced the sentiments of the unthinking in stately language. This made him generally admired. It is not to be inferred that he was insincere — he had been granted a popular mind; he shared with the majority a strong aversion from disagreeable truths. His widest reflections were bounded by the word "Unpleasant," and every truth that was unpleasant was to the Bishop of Westborough "one of those things that are better left undiscussed." He had a warm affection for this phrase, which occurred in all his articles for the cultured reviews. It was a phrase that suggested much earnestness of thought, while it spared him the exertion of thinking at all.

Domestically he had been no less fortunate than in his mental limitations. He possessed a little wife, who listened to him with the utmost patience, and he had seen both his girls make brilliant matches in their first season. The history of the bridegroom had, in each case, been "one of those things that are better left undiscussed." Accordingly, the Bishop boasted a grateful heart; in fact when he reflected how abundantly Providence had blessed him, he was more than normally horrified to think of the impious murmurings of the poor.

That a personage of his environment and disposition had been tempted towards so unepiscopalian

a course as writing a comedy, proves how true it is that nothing happens but the unforeseen. It was one of the speediest conquests of Miss Clarges's career — a career in which peers had been plentiful, but prelates had hitherto been lacking. He had made her acquaintance at a reception — she was clever off the stage as well as on it and had always tempered her indiscretions with tact; duchesses called her "dear." He thought her the most fascinating woman he had ever met, and talked to her about the conditions of the English stage with considerable satisfaction to himself.

"What a dramatist your lordship would have made if you had not been a bishop!" she murmured, with rapt eyes.

"Oh — er — you are jesting," said the Bishop, asking for more.

"No, indeed — I mean it," returned the lady reverently. "You have what we call the 'sense of the theatre.' And it is so rare! You startled me just now — you know by intuition things that the professional dramatist needs years of experience to find out. I can't tell you how extraordinary it is!" She regarded him as if she were being confronted by a miracle.

Partly because he was very vain, and partly because Miss Clarges was very good-looking, the lie that she forgot almost as soon as it was spoken had lingered caressingly with the Bishop. Sitting

in the Palace one afternoon with nothing to do, he found himself scribbling "Act I.— A Drawing Room." He had no definite intention of continuing, still less had he a definite plot; but like everyone who is deficient in self-criticism, he wrote with prodigious facility, and his first act was finished in a few days.

Miss Clarges had been a good deal surprised to receive a semi-humorous note from the Bishop of Westborough, reminding her of their conversation, and hinting that he would be glad to have her opinion of "a dramatic bantling." Tea and a tête-à-tête followed in the lady's boudoir. She found Act I. all that she had dreaded, and told him it was most original. Beaming with importance, he perpetrated Act II., and read her that. She was contemplating a season of management, and in sanguine moments reflected that a practised hand might knock the Bishop's comedy into something like shape, and that the Bishop's name on the bills would be well worth having. So she offered various suggestions about the leading part, and was at home as often as he chose to call — and for some weeks he had chosen to call very often indeed.

Remember that he was only fifty. He had married when he was twenty-five, married a girl who was taken by his handsome face, and who brought him a very respectable dower. Though the dower had fascinated him more than the girl, the courtship

had comprised his sentimental experience. As has been said, he had had no reason to complain of his choice — he had been remarkably successful in all his relationships — he felt that his wife worshipped him, and her worship, and his worldly progress, had contented him fully. But now, for the first time in his career, he was thrown into intimate association with a woman who had captivated those who were seeing life, and those who had seen it — and the Bishop of Westborough fell in love with her as violently as many wiser men had done before him.

As for her, it was the first time in the woman's career that she had been openly admired by a bishop. At the beginning she was attracted by his reputation — much as her youngest adorers had been attracted by her own — but presently she was attracted by his homage. He appealed to her one weakness, her vanity. Though she thought it a pity that he wanted to write a comedy, she considered him a great man; his profound belief in himself, supported by a nation's esteem, imposed on her. To have made a conquest of a pillar of the Church flattered her inordinately; the novelty of the situation had its effect on the actress, too — and, to her unspeakable amazement, Kitty Clarges fell in love with the Bishop.

It was at this juncture that circumstances had forced him to mortify the Rector of Sweetbay.

"The affair makes me doubt whether I ought to

proceed with my own play," he admitted to her one afternoon.

"My dear friend!" She meant "What rot!" but she no longer said "what rot!" even to other actresses; and she wore dove-coloured gowns, and had been to hear him preach. The higher life was a little trying, but she liked to feel worthier of him.

"My action in the matter may be misconstrued. Of course, I've simply deferred to the local prejudice, but it may be thought that *I* disapprove of the man's tendencies. If I figured as a dramatist myself a little later, I might be placed in an ambiguous position. . . . Perhaps we might overcome the difficulty by a pseudonym?"

She looked blank. "Your lordship's name will be a draw; I'm afraid a pseudonym would mean waiving a great deal."

"Financially? The pecuniary result is not important to me."

But it was important to her. "If the secret were really kept, you'd be waiving all the kudos too," she added.

"Well, we must consider," said the Bishop, clinking the ice in his glass; "you shall advise me — though I fear I'm exceeding an author's privilege. By the way, does the manageress always offer the author a whisky and soda?"

"She offered you an alternative," said Miss Clarges, laughing; "the whisky and soda was your

choice. But you don't really mean to throw the comedy up, do you? Think of poor me!"

The Bishop's eyes were eloquent. "Thinking of you," he said, after a lingering gaze, "I have this to say: you will be put to considerable expense in bringing out my work, and, novice as I am, I'm aware that a theatre is a heavy speculation; if I withhold the advantage of my name from the piece, I shall claim to share your risk."

"You are very generous, dear friend; I don't think I could say 'yes' to that."

"It is no more than fair."

"I'd rather not. I — I shouldn't care for you to find money for me!" said Kitty Clarges — and was conscious that she had soared into the higher life indeed.

"You are scarcely treating me as the dear friend you allow me to believe myself," urged the Bishop, missing the greatest compliment of his life.

"Oh!" she said under her breath.

"I should be serving my own ends. And besides ——"

"Besides what?"

"It would make me very happy to think that I served *you.*"

Her eyelids fell. "You *have* served me."

"I rejoice to hear it. May I ask how?"

"You've served me by your friendship. You've given me different thoughts, taken me out of myself,

done me good — in some ways!" She sighed deeply. "I've learnt that there are so much *realer* things than the shams that satisfied me before we met. I've been a very . . . worldly woman; you know, don't you?"

"Few human beings are stronger than temptations, child," he said melodiously, "and yours must have been many."

"I used to want you to think me better than I am. Now I — I do and I don't. Oh, I can't explain!"

"You are showing me your heart — you need not spell it."

"I suppose what I mean really is that I want you to know me as I am, and yet to like me just as much. I wonder if you would?"

He laid a gentle hand upon her shoulder. "Why not put me to the test?"

"I daren't," she said.

"Am I so hard?"

She shook her head, silently.

"What then?"

"I'm so bad," she whispered. She drooped a little nearer to him.

"Why do you say such things?" cried the Bishop; "you hurt me!"

"Haven't you met other sinners?"

"I would have had *your* past free from sin."

"Oh, my past?" she sobbed, and bowed herself

in his arms. "My past is past — I'm sinning now!"

Much may be done by earnest endeavour, and he persuaded himself that his embrace was episcopal.

"My child," he murmured at last, soothing her tenderly, "I will not affect to misunderstand what you have said — it would be a false kindness to you. Nor will I be guilty of concealing the transgressions of my own heart. Were I a younger man, I might doubt the righteousness of owning that the attachment is mutual; but the years bring wisdom, and at my age we see deeply. My duty is to help you, and I realise that I can help you only by a perfect candour. I acknowledge, therefore, that you are indeed most dear to me."

"Oh, you are great!" she exclaimed. "I shall see you still? Promise you'll still come here — don't let me lose you! Say it! Say again you love me!"

"You are indeed most dear to me," repeated the Bishop, who thought this way of putting it sounded more innocent. He got up and paced the room with agitation. "You ask me if I will still come here. I do not disguise from myself that many might think that I should answer 'no'; many might hold it my duty to desert you in the conflict that must be waged, to leave you to bear the brunt of it alone. I am not one of them. Flight is at best the refuge of a coward. Doughtier than to flee temptation is to con-

front and conquer it." He swept the hair from his brow with a noble gesture. "I recognise that my highest duty is to share your struggles — to solace and sustain you. Yes, I will come! We have a mighty battle before us, you and I — and we will fight side by side, my comrade, till we win!"

In other words, he ventured to go to tea there all the same, and had whisky and soda when it wasn't teatime.

II

How much of what the Stage Door Club said about them was fact and how much of it was fiction, is a thing that could be decided only by the Bishop or Miss Clarges — neither of whom is to be consulted on the subject. But the Rev. Baker Barling, who frequently dropped into the club for the house dinner, or a game of poker, heard the gossip; and Baker Barling confided it to Mrs. Baker Barling; and Mrs. Baker Barling, whose wrath against the Bishop had in no way abated, manœuvred for the joy of condoling with the Bishop's wife.

Miss Clarges was paralysed one morning by a note in which "Mrs. Lullieton Meadows," mentioning that her husband was the Bishop of Westborough, requested the actress to receive her upon a matter of the utmost importance the same afternoon. The actress's first impulse was to be "out" when the lady called; her second, to telegraph to the Bishop for advice. The fear of driving Mrs.

Meadows to extremities, and the thought that a telegram might fall into the wrong hands, prevented her adopting either course. She could only pray for the ability to persuade the visitor that her suspicions were unfounded, and she felt sick with misgiving as the day wore on.

How extraordinary of the woman! Whether she meant to be offensive, or pathetic, what a folly of her to come! On the stage, of course, such scenes were usual, and Kitty Clarges knew exactly how she would have to behave there — that she would be first mocking, then attentive, and finally moved to repentence. But the theatre was one thing, and life was another. In real life it was preposterous of a person to seek an interview and plead for the return of a husband's heart; in real life it was impossible to return a heart, even if one wished to do it. And in this case, the wish was lacking; Miss Clarges was so infatuated by the Bishop that she had even been jealous to remember that another woman had a legal claim to him.

At the tingle of the bell, she caught her breath. She had never seen "the other woman," and mixed with her apprehension was a strong curiosity to know what his wife was like. "Mrs. Meadows!" announced the maid. The actress turned to the doorway, trembling, and saw with satisfaction that the lady was a timid little woman, dowdily dressed; she looked as if she lived in Tunbridge Wells.

"Mrs. Meadows — how good of you to call!"

Mrs. Meadows advanced awkwardly; it was evident that she was painfully embarrassed. "Miss Clarges? I hope I haven't put you to any inconvenience?" she murmured.

"It is an immense pleasure to me to meet you. Won't you sit down?"

For an instant the Bishop's wife hesitated. Then she sat at the extreme edge of a chair, and moistened her lips.

"My visit must appear very strange to you?"

"Most kind!" said Kitty Clarges. "How is his lordship getting on with his play? It'll soon be finished now, I suppose?"

"I daresay — I really don't know; I didn't come to talk about the play," Mrs. Meadows faltered; "I came because you might do more for me than anybody else alive! Miss Clarges, my husband is in love with you."

The start, the bewilderment in the eyes, was admirable; "My . . . *dear* Mrs. Meadows?"

"You need not trouble to deny it," said the lady quietly, "because he has acknowledged it to me. But that isn't all — you are in love with my husband."

"Are you here to insult me?" cried Miss Clarges, rising. "I have the honour to be one of his lordship's friends, he has been pleased to discuss his comedy with me. Not unnatural, I think? Espe-

cially as I hope to produce the piece! As for . . . what you say, there has never been a word, a syllable — our conversation might have been phonographed for all London to hear!" The indignation of her voice quivered into pain. "I wouldn't have had this happen for the world — I can't understand it!" She struggled with a sob, and suppressed it proudly. "It's cruel!"

"I don't wonder that he admires you," said his wife thoughtfully; "you have great talent. But I have seen one of your letters to him. Here it is!"

Miss Clarges gasped, and looked at it. She sat down again very slowly. "All right," she said, "I *am* fond of your husband! Well?"

"It was finding your letter that made me write to you. I heard weeks ago that he was mad about you, but the letter showed me that *you* cared for *him*. Oh, I know that I oughtn't to have written! I considered a long time before I made up my mind. But there was so much at stake, I thought you might help me. If you will listen ——"

"What for?" exclaimed Miss Clarges. "What's the use of my listening? Even if I promised you not to see him again — I wouldn't promise it, but if I did — would it make him any fonder of *you?* Do you think, if *I* lost a man, I should beg the other woman to give him back to me? I should know she couldn't do it; I should know I might as well beg her to give me back — my inno-

cence. And I shouldn't reproach her, either! I'd reproach myself! I should call myself a fool for not holding my own. Women like me *don't* lose the man they want — we know how easy it is for him to leave us, and we take the trouble to keep him. It's you good women who are always being left; after you've caught the man, you think you've nothing more to do. Marriage is the end of your little story, so you take it for granted it *must* be the end of his. The more you love him, the sooner you bore him. You go bankrupt in the honeymoon — you're a back number to him before you've been married a month — he knows all your life, and all your mind, and all your moods. You haven't a surprise in reserve for him — and then you wonder he yawns. Great heavens! To hold a man's interest, show him your heart, as you pull out a tape measure — an inch at a time. I adore your husband; I venerate him! My guilty love has made me a purer woman. You can't realise that — I don't expect you to realise it; but surely you must know that — if you wept and went down on your knees to me — I couldn't say, 'Because the right's all on your side, he shall never think about me any more?"

"You misunderstand the object of my visit," said Mrs. Meadows meekly. "I didn't come to weep to you; I didn't come to beg you to say that he should never think about you any more. I came to

beg you to tell me what you find in him to love."

"Eh?" ejaculated Miss Clarges.

"I came to beg you to tell me what you find in him to love," repeated the elder woman in plaintive tones. "You see, to you he is only an episode; but unless I choose to make a scandal — and I have daughters to consider — *I* must expect to spend many more years with him. If you will help me to discover some attraction in him, it will make life far easier for me."

Kitty Clarges sat staring at her dumbly. "You f-find no attraction in him?" she stammered at last.

"It is unconventional of me to admit it to you; but, as I say, there is so much at stake — I feel justified in asking your assistance. To me he is tedious beyond words to tell. If you would explain why you adore him, if you would show me some merit, some spark of talent, or wit, or humour, something to make his pretensions less intolerable — you don't know how thankful to you I should be."

"Your husband is a great man." She spoke with a touch of uncertainty.

"Oh, no! And I should be foolish to ask so much — a moderately intelligent man is all that a woman like me has the right to expect. The Bishop is unfortunately very, very dull. Believe me, I have tried most conscientiously to be deceived by him. I used to read his Press notices, and say 'Look what the newspapers say about him — it *must* be true!'

But I knew it wasn't. I used to listen to his sermons — there aren't many of them; they've been the same sermons for twenty years — and say, 'What lovely language, what noble thoughts! How proud his little Mildred should be!' But, though I was a young girl then, I knew that the lovely language was all sound and no sense, and that the noble thoughts came out of the *Dictionary of Quotations*. O Miss Clarges! you are a brilliant woman, far, far cleverer than I — he must have some stray virtue that my earnest search hasn't brought to light, or you couldn't gush so romantically about him. Help me to see it! Think how he wearies me — tell me what the virtue is!"

The actress was breathing heavily, her nostrils fluttered; on her bloodless cheeks the delicacy of "Maiden Bloom" stood out in unbecoming blotches. To hear that she idolised a man whom this little provincial in last year's fashions disdained as a bore, robbed her of speech. She had not believed there could be such depths of humiliation in the world.

Some seconds passed, while the suppliant watched her wistfully.

"If you don't care for your husband, I'm afraid I couldn't teach you to love him."

"No, no; I only thought you might help me to put up with him; I'm not unreasonable — I'd be grateful for small mercies. If you'd mention a ray of interest in him, I'd keep my eyes on that, and

make the most of it. . . . You're not vexed with me for coming?"

"Oh, not at all; I — I suppose you've been very . . . amiable, our interview has been rather quaint; I'm sorry I can't oblige you."

"Well," sighed Mrs. Meadows, "it can't be helped. But I must say I'm disappointed! When I found out there was a woman in love with him, it simply amazed me! I felt it only right to consult you — it seemed such an opportunity to improve matters at home. Still, there it is, if you can't tell me, you can't!" She was very downcast. "Then I'll say 'Good afternoon.'"

"May I offer you some — tea?" quavered Kitty, clinging to the mantelpiece.

"Thank you so much, but I'm afraid I must be going now; I promised to see our secretary at the office of the Mission Fund at four o'clock. Good-bye, Miss Clarges. You needn't tell the Bishop that I called. It has been quite useless!"

She sighed herself out.

Now, though Kitty Clarges endeavoured to persuade herself by turns that Mrs. Meadows was a fool incapable of appreciating her husband, and that Mrs. Meadows was a diplomat scheming to disenchant her with him, both endeavours were unsuccessful. She could not think the woman an utter idiot, and still less was it possible to think her a genius. Kitty Clarges was less entranced by the

Bishop in their next meeting. Between them lurked a dowdy little figure, regarding her with astonished eyes. The astonishment shamed her as no homily could have ever done. The figure was present at all their meetings, and often she lost sight of the Bishop's classical features, and could see nothing but his wife's eyes wondering at her. His eloquence was no longer thrilling — she was obsessed by the knowledge that it wasn't good enough for the woman in the *modes* of Tunbridge Wells.

Before long the sight of her own dove-coloured gowns began to get on her nerves, and gradually she discarded them. Once, when the Bishop proposed to visit her, she told him that she would be lunching out. A few days later she wrote that unforeseen circumstances denied her the hope of producing his comedy. His urgent letter of inquiry remained unanswered. When he called for an explanation she was " not at home."

IX

TRICOTRIN ENTERTAINS

ONE night when Pitou went home, an unaccustomed perfume floated to meet him on the stairs. He climbed them in amazement.

"If we lived in an age of miracles, I should conclude that Tricotrin was smoking a cigar," he said to himself. "What can it be?"

The pair occupied a garret in the rue des Trois Frères at this time, where their window, in sore need of repairs, commanded an unrivalled view of the dirty steps descending to the Passage des Abbesses. To-night, behold Tricotrin, pacing the garret with dignity, between his lips an Havannah that could have cost no less than a franc. The composer rubbed his eyes.

"Have they made you an Academician?" he stammered, "or has your uncle, the silk manufacturer, died and left you his business?"

"My friend," replied the poet, "prepare yourself for 'a New and Powerful Feuilleton of the Most Absorbing Interest!' I am no longer the young man who went out this evening — I am a celebrity."

"I thought," said the composer, "that it couldn't be you when I saw the cigar."

"Figure yourself," continued Tricotrin, "that at nine o'clock I was wandering on the Grands Boulevards with a thirst that could have consumed a brewery. I might mention that I had also empty pockets, but —"

"It would be to pad the feuilleton shamelessly," said Pitou: "there are things that one takes for granted."

"At the corner of the Place de l'Opéra, a fellow passed me whom I knew and yet did not know; I could not recall where it was we had met. I turned and followed him, racking my brains the while. Suddenly I remembered —"

"Pardon me," interrupted the composer, "but I have read *Bel-Ami* myself. Oh, it is quite evident that you are a celebrity — you have already forgotten how to be original!"

"There is a resemblance, it is true," admitted Tricotrin. "However, Maupassant had no copyright in the Place de l'Opéra. I say that I remembered the man; I had known him when he was in the advertisement business in Lyons. Well, we have supped together; he is in a position to do me a service — he will ask an editor to publish an 'Interview' with me!"

"An 'Interview?'" exclaimed Pitou. "You are to be 'Interviewed?' Oh, no, my poor friend,

too much meat has unhinged your reason! Go to sleep — you will be hungry and sane again to-morrow!"

"It will startle some of them, hein? 'Gustave Tricotrin at Home' — in the illustrated edition of *Le Demi-Mot?*"

"Illustrated?" gasped Pitou. He looked round the attic. "Did I understand you to say 'illustrated?'"

"Well, well," said Tricotrin, "we shall move the beds! And, perhaps, the concierge will lend us the palm from the portals. With a palm and an amiable photographer, an air of splendour is easily arrived at. I should like a screen — we will borrow one from a studio in the Rue Ravignan. Mon Dieu! with a palm and a screen I foresee the most opulent effects. 'A Corner of the Study' — we can put the screen in front of the washhand-stand, and litter the table with manuscripts — you will admit that we have a sufficiency of manuscripts? — no one will know that they have all been rejected. Also, a painter in the Rue Ravignan might lend us a few of his failures — 'Before you go, let me show you my pictures!' said Monsieur Tricotrin: 'I am an ardent collector!'"

In Montmartre the sight of two "types" shifting household gods makes no sensation — the sails of the windmills still revolve. On the day that it had its likeness taken, the attic was temporarily trans-

formed. At least a score of unappreciated masterpieces concealed the dilapidation of the walls; the broken window was decorated with an Eastern fabric that had been a cherished "property" of half the ateliers in Paris; the poet himself — with the palm contributed by the concierge drooping gracefully above his head — mused in a massive chair in which Solomon had been pronouncing judgment until 12:15, when the poet had called for it. The appearance of exhaustion observed by admirers of the poet's portrait was due to the chair's appalling weight. As he staggered under it up the steps of the Passage des Abbesses, the young man had feared he would expire on the threshold of his fame.

However, the photographer proved as resourceful as could be desired, and perhaps the most striking feature of the illustration was the spaciousness of the apartment in which Monsieur Tricotrin was presented to readers of *Le Demi-Mot*. The name of the thoroughfare was not obtruded.

With what pride was that issue of the journal regarded in the Rue des Trois Frères!

"Aha!" cried Tricotrin, who in moments persuaded himself that he really occupied such noble quarters, "those who repudiated me in the days of my struggles will be a little repentant now, hein? Stone Heart will discover that I was not wrong in relying on my genius!"

"I assume," said Pitou, "that 'Stone Heart' is

your newest pet-name for the silk-manufacturing uncle?"

"You catch my meaning precisely. I propose to send a copy of the paper to Lyons, with the 'Interview' artistically bordered by laurels; I cannot draw laurels myself, but there are plenty of people who can. We will find someone to do it when we palter with starvation at the Golden Pheasant this evening — or perhaps we had better fast at the Lucullus Junior, instead, there is often some ink in the bottle there. I shall put the address in the margin — my uncle will not know where it is, and on the grounds of euphony I have no fault to find with it. It would not surprise me if I received an affectionate letter and a banknote in reply — the perversity of human nature delights in generosities to the prosperous."

"It is a fact," said Pitou. "That human nature!"

"Who knows? — he may even renew the allowance that he used to make me!"

"Upon my word, more unlikely things have happened," Pitou conceded.

"Mon Dieu, Nicolas, we shall again have enough to eat!"

"Ah, visionary!" exclaimed Pitou; "are there no bounds to your imagination?"

Now the perversity to which the poet referred did inspire Monsieur Rigaud, of Lyons, to loosen his

purse-strings. He wrote that he rejoiced to learn that Gustave was beginning to make his way, and enclosed a present of two hundred and fifty francs. More, after an avuncular preamble which the poet skipped — having a literary hatred of digressions in the work of others — he even hinted that the allowance might be resumed.

What a banquet there was in bohemia! How the glasses jingled afterwards in La Lune Rousse, and oh, the beautiful hats that Ivonne and Marcelle displayed in the Jardin des Buttes-Chaumont on the next fine Sunday! Even when the last ripples of the splash were stilled, the comrades swaggered gallantly on the Boulevard Rochechouart, for by any post might not the first instalment of that allowance arrive?

Weeks passed; and Tricotrin began to say, "It looks to me as if we needed another 'Interview'!"

And then came a letter which was no less cordial than its predecessor, but which crashed upon the humble attic like a bombshell from the Prussians. Monsieur Rigaud stated that business would bring him to Paris on the following evening, and that he anticipated the pleasure of visiting his nephew; he trusted that his dear Gustave would meet him at the station. The poet and composer stared at each other with bloodless faces.

"You must call at his hotel instead," faltered Pitou at last.

"But you may be sure he will wish to see my elegant abode."

"'It is in the hands of the decorators. How unfortunate!'"

"He would propose to offer them suggestions; he is a born suggester."

"'Fever is raging in the house — a most infectious fever; we will ask a medical student to give us one."

"It would not explain my lodging in a slum meanwhile."

"Well, let us admit that there is nothing to be done; you will have to own up."

"Are you insane? It is improvident youths like you who come to lament their wasted lives. If I could receive him this once as he expects to be received, we cannot doubt that it would mean an income of two thousand francs to me. Prosperity dangles before us — shall I fail to clutch it? Mon Dieu, what a catastrophe, his coming to Paris! Why cannot he conduct his business in Lyons? Is there not enough money in the city of Lyons to satisfy him? O grasper! what greed! Nicolas, my more than brother, if it were night when I took him to a sumptuous apartment, he might not notice the name of the street — I could talk brilliantly as we turned the corner. Also I could scintillate as I led him away. He would never know that it was not the Rue des Trois Frères."

"You are right," agreed Pitou; "but which is the pauper in our social circle whose sumptuous apartment you propose to acquire?"

"One must consider," said Tricotrin. "Obviously, I am compelled to entertain in somebody's; fortunately, I have two days to find it in. I shall now go forth!"

It was a genial morning, and the first person he accosted in the Rue Ravignan was Goujaud, painting in the patch of garden before the studios. "Tell me, Goujaud," exclaimed the poet, "have you any gilded acquaintance who would permit me the use of his apartment for two hours to-morrow evening?"

Goujaud reflected for some seconds, with his head to one side. "I have never done anything so fine as this before," he observed; "regard the atmosphere of it!"

"It is execrable!" replied Tricotrin, and went next door to Flamant. "My old one," he explained, "I have urgent need of a regal apartment for two hours to-morrow — have you a wealthy friend who would accommodate me?"

"You may beautify your bedroom with all my possessions," returned Flamant heartily. "I have a stuffed parrot that is most decorative, but I have not a friend that is wealthy."

"You express yourself like a First Course for the Foreigner," said Tricotrin, much annoyed; "devil take your stuffed parrot!"

The heat of the sun increased towards midday, and drops began to trickle under the young man's hat. By four o'clock he had called upon sixty-two persons, exclusive of Sanquereau, whom he had been unable to wake. He bethought himself of Lajeunie, the novelist; but Lajeunie could offer him nothing more serviceable than a pass for the Elysée-Montmartre. "Now how is it possible that I spend my life among such imbeciles?" groaned the unhappy poet; "one offers me a parrot, and another a pass for a dancing-hall! Can I assure my uncle, who is a married man, and produces silk in vast quantities, that I reside in a dancing-hall? Besides, we know those passes — they are only available for ladies."

"It is true that you could not get in by it," assented Lajeunie, "but I give it to you freely. Take it, my poor fellow! Though it may appear inadequate to the occasion, who knows but what it will prove to be the basis of your fortune?"

"You are as crazy as the stories you write," said Tricotrin. "Still it can go in my pocket." And he made, exhausted, for a bench in the Place Dancourt, where he apostrophised his fate.

Thus occupied, he fell asleep, and presently a young woman sauntered from the sidewalk across the square. In the shady little Place Dancourt is the little white Théâtre Montmartre, and she first perused the play-bill, and then contemplated the sleeping poet. It may have been that she found some-

thing attractive in his bearing, or it may have been that ragamuffins sprawled elsewhere; but, having determined to wait awhile, she selected the bench on which he reposed, and forthwith woke him.

"Now this is nice!" he exclaimed, realising his lapse with a start.

"Oh, monsieur!" said she, blushing.

"Pardon; I referred to my having dozed when every moment is of consequence," he explained. "And yet," he went on ruefully, "upon my soul, I cannot conjecture where I shall go next!"

Her response was so sympathetic that it tempted him to remain a little longer, and in five minutes she was recounting her own perplexities. It transpired that she was a lady's-maid with a holiday, and the problem before her was whether to spend her money on a theatre, or on a ball.

"Now that is a question which is disposed of instantly," said Tricotrin. "You shall spend your money on a theatre, and go to a ball as well." And out fluttered the pink pass presented to him by Lajeunie.

The girl's tongue was as lively as her gratitude. She was, she told him, maid to the famous Colette Aubray, who had gone unattended that afternoon to visit the owner of a villa in the country, where she would stay until the next day but one. "So you see, monsieur, we poor servants are left alone in the flat to amuse ourselves as best we can!"

"Mon Dieu!" ejaculated Tricotrin, and added mentally, "It was decidedly the good kind fairies that pointed to this bench!"

He proceeded to pay the young woman such ardent attentions that she assumed he meant to accompany her to the ball, and her disappointment was extreme when he had to own that the state of his finances forbade it. "All I can suggest, my dear Léonie," he concluded, "is that I shall be your escort when you leave. It is abominable that you must have other partners in the meantime, but I feel that you will be constant to me in your thoughts. I shall have much to tell you — I shall whisper a secret in your ear; for, incredible as it may sound, my sweet child, you alone in Paris have the power to save me."

"Oh, monsieur!" faltered the admiring lady's-maid, "it has always been my great ambition to save a young man, especially a young man who used such lovely language. I am sure, by the way you talk, that you must be a poet!"

"Extraordinary," mused Tricotrin, "that all the world recognises me as a poet, excepting when it reads my poetry!" And this led him to reflect that he must sell some of it, in order to provide refreshment for Léonie before he begged her aid. Accordingly, he arranged to meet her when the ball finished, and limped back to the attic, where he made up a choice assortment of his wares.

He had resolved to try the office of *Le Demi-Mot*,

but his reception there was cold. "You should not presume on our good nature," demurred the editor; "only last month we had an article on you, saying that you were highly talented, and now you ask us to publish your work besides. There must be a limit to such things."

He examined the collection, nevertheless, with a deprecatory countenance, and offered ten francs for three of the finest specimens. "From *Le Demi-Mot* I would counsel you to accept low terms," he said, with engaging interest, "on account of the prestige you derive from appearing in it."

"In truth it is a noble thing, prestige," admitted Tricotrin; "but, monsieur, I have never known a man able to make a meal of it when he was starving, or to warm himself before it when he was without a fire. Still — though it is a jumble-sale price — let them go!"

"Payment will be made in due course," said the editor, and became immersed in correspondence.

Tricotrin paled to the lips, and the next five minutes were terrible; indeed, he did not doubt that he would have to limp elsewhere. At last he cried, "Well, let us say seven francs, cash. Seven francs in the hand are worth ten in due course." And thus the bargain was concluded.

"It was well for Hercules that none of his labours was the extraction of payment from an editor!" panted the poet on the doorstep. But he was now

enabled to fête the lady's-maid in grand style, and — not to be outdone in generosity — she placed Mdlle. Aubray's flat at his disposal directly he asked for it.

"You have accomplished a miracle!" averred Pitou, in the small hours, when he heard the news.

Tricotrin waved a careless gesture. "To a man of resources all things are possible," he murmured.

The next evening the silk manufacturer was warmly embraced on the platform, and not a little surprised to learn that his nephew expected a visit at once. However, the young man's consternation was so profound when objections were made that, in the end, they were withdrawn. Tricotrin directed the driver after monsieur Rigaud was in the cab, and, on their reaching the courtyard, there was Léonie, all frills, ready to carry the handbag.

"Your servant?" inquired monsieur Rigaud, with some disapproval, as they went upstairs; "she is rather fancifully dressed, hein?"

"Is it so?" answered Tricotrin. "Perhaps a bachelor is not sufficiently observant in these matters. Still she is an attentive domestic. Take off your things, my dear uncle, and make yourself at home. What joy it gives me to see you here!"

"Mon Dieu," exclaimed the silk manufacturer, looking about him, "you have a place fit for a prince! It must have cost a pretty penny."

"Between ourselves," said Tricotrin, "I often reproach myself for what I spent on it; I could make very good use to-day of some of the money I squandered."

"What curtains!" murmured monsieur Rigaud, fingering the silk enraptured. "The quality is superb! What may they have charged you for these curtains?"

"It was years ago — upon my word I do not remember," drawled Tricotrin, who had no idea whether he ought to say five hundred france, or five thousand. "Also, you must not think I have bought everything you see — many of the pictures and bronzes are presents from admirers of my work. It is gratifying, hein?"

"I — I — To confess the truth, we had not heard of your triumphs," admitted monsieur Rigaud; "I did not dream you were so successful."

"Ah, it is in a very modest way," Tricotrin replied. "I am not a millionaire, I assure you! On the contrary, it is often difficult to make both ends meet — although," he added hurriedly, "I live with the utmost economy, my uncle! the days of my thoughtlessness are past. A man should save, a man should provide for the future!"

At this moment he was astonished to see Léonie open the door and announce that dinner was served. She had been even better than her word.

"Dinner?" cried monsieur Rigaud. "Ah, now I understand why you were so dejected when I would not come!"

"Bah, it will be a very simple meal," said his nephew, "but after a journey one must eat. Let us go in." He was turning the wrong way, but Léonie's eye saved him.

"Come," he proceeded, taking his seat, "some soup — some good soup! What will you drink, my uncle?"

"On the sideboard I see champagne," chuckled monsieur Rigaud; "you treat the old man well, you rogue!"

"Hah," said Tricotrin, who had not observed it, "the cellar, I own, is an extravagance of mine! Alone, I drink only mineral waters, or a little claret, much diluted; but to my dearest friends I must give the dearest wines. Léonie, champagne!"

It was a capital dinner, and the cigars and cigarettes that Léonie put on the table with the coffee were of the highest excellence. Agreeable conversation whiled away some hours, and Tricotrin began to look for his uncle to get up; but it was raining smartly, and monsieur Rigaud was reluctant to bestir himself. Another hour lagged by, and at last Tricotrin faltered:

"I fear I must beg you to excuse me for leaving you, my uncle; it is most annoying, but I am compelled to go out. The fact is, I have consented to

collaborate with Capus, and he is so eccentric, this dear Alfred — we shall be at work all night."

"Go, my good Gustave," said his uncle readily; "and, as I am very tired, if you have no objection, I will occupy your bed."

Tricotrin's jaw dropped, and it was by a supreme effort that he stammered how pleased the arrangement would make him. To intensify the fix, Léonie and the cook had disappeared — doubtless to the *mansarde* in which they slept — and he was left to cope with the catastrophe alone. However, having switched on the lights, he conducted the elderly gentleman to an enticing apartment. He wished him an affectionate "good-night," and after promising to wake him early, made for home, leaving the manufacturer sleepily surveying the room's imperial splendour.

"What magnificence!" soliloquised monsieur Rigaud. "What toilet articles!" He got into bed. "What a coverlet — there must be twenty thousand francs on top of me!"

He had not slumbered under them long when he was aroused by such a commotion that he feared for the action of his heart. Blinking in the glare, he perceived Léonie in scanty attire, distracted on her knees — and, by the bedside, a beautiful lady in a travelling cloak, raging with the air of a lioness.

"Go away!" quavered the manufacturer. "What is the meaning of this intrusion?"

"Intrusion?" raved the lady. "That is what you will explain, monsieur! How comes it that you are in my bed?"

"Yours?" ejaculated monsieur Rigaud. "What is it you say? You are making a grave error, for which you will apologise, madame."

"Oh, hold me back," pleaded the lady, throwing up her eyes, "hold me back or I shall assault him!" She flung to Léonie. "Wretched girl, you shall pay for this! Not content with lavishing my champagne and my friend's cigars on your lover, you must put him to recuperate in my room!"

"Oh!" gasped the manufacturer, and hid his head under the priceless coverlet. "Such an imputation is unpardonable," he roared, reappearing. "I am monsieur Rigaud, of Lyons; I am in the flat of my nephew, monsieur Tricotrin; I request you to retire!"

"Imbecile!" screamed the lady; "you are in the flat of *me* — Colette Aubray. And your presence may ruin me — I expect a visitor on most important business! He has not my self-control; if he finds you here he will most certainly send you a challenge. He is the best swordsman in Paris! I advise you to believe me, for you have just five minutes to save your life!"

"Monsieur," wailed Léonie, "you have been deceived!" And, between her sobs, she confessed the

circumstances, which he heard with the greatest difficulty, owing to the chattering of his teeth.

The rain was descending in cataracts when monsieur Rigaud got outside, but though the trams and the trains had both stopped running, and cabs were as dear as radium, his fury was so tempestuous that nothing could deter him from reaching the poet's real abode. His attack on the front door warned Tricotrin and Pitou what had happened, and they raised themselves, blanched from their pillows, to receive his curses. It was impossible to reason with him, and he launched the most frightful denunciations at his nephew for an hour, when the abatement of the downpour permitted him to depart. More, at noon, who should arrive but Léonie in tears! She had been dismissed from her employment, and came to beg the poet to intercede for her.

"What calamities!" groaned Tricotrin. "How fruitless are man's noblest endeavours without the favouring breeze! I shall drown myself at eight o'clock. However, I will readily plead for you first, if your mistress will receive me."

By the maid's advice he presented himself late in the day, and when he had cooled his heels in the salon for some time, a lady entered, who was of such ravishing appearance that his head swam.

"Monsieur Tricotrin?" she inquired haughtily.

"I have heard your name from your uncle, monsieur. Are you here to visit my servant?"

"Mademoiselle," he faltered, "I am here to throw myself on your mercy. At eight o'clock I have decided to commit suicide, for I am ruined. The only hope left me is to win your pardon before I die."

"I suppose your uncle has disowned you?" she said. "Naturally! It was a pretty situation to put him in — how would you care to be in it yourself?"

"Alas, mademoiselle," sighed Tricotrin, "there are situations to which a poor poet may not aspire!"

After regarding him silently, she exclaimed, "I cannot understand what a boy with eyes like yours saw in Léonie?"

"Merely good nature and a means to an end, believe me! If you would ease my last moments, reinstate her in your service. Do not let me drown with the knowledge that another is suffering for my fault! Mademoiselle, I entreat you — take her back!"

"And why should I ease your last moments?" she demurred.

"Because I have no right to ask it; because I have no defence for my sin towards you; because you would be justified in trampling on me — and to pardon would be sublime!"

"You are very eloquent for my maid," returned the lady.

He shook his head. "Oh, no — I fear I am pleading for myself. For, if you reinstate the girl, it will prove that you forgive the man — and I want your forgiveness so much!" He fell at her feet.

"Does your engagement for eight o'clock press, monsieur?" murmured the lady, smiling. "If you could dine here again to-night, I might relent by degrees."

"And she is adorable!" he told Pitou. "I passed the most delicious evening of my life!"

"It is fortunate," observed Pitou, "for that, and your uncle's undying enmity, are all you have obtained by your imposture. Remember that the evening cost two thousand francs a year!"

"Ah, misanthrope," cried Tricotrin radiantly, "there must be a crumpled roseleaf in every Eden!"

X

THE INFIDELITY OF MONSIEUR NOULENS

WHENEVER they talk of him, whom I will call "Noulens"— of his novels, his method, the eccentricities of his talent — someone is sure to say, "But what comrades, he and his wife! They are devoted to each other!" You are certain to hear it; and as often as I hear it myself, I think of what he told me that evening — I remember the shock I had.

At the beginning, I had expected little. When I went in, his wife said, "I fear he will be poor company; he has to write a short story for *La Voix* and cannot find a theme — he has been beating his brains all day." So far from anticipating emotions, I had proposed dining there another night instead, but she would not allow me to leave. "Something you say may suggest a motif to him," she declared, "and he can write or dictate the story in an hour, when you have gone."

So I stayed, and after dinner he lay on the sofa, bewailing the fate that had made him an author. The salon communicated with his study, and through the open door he had the invitation of his writing-table — the little sheaf of paper that she had put

in readiness for him, the lighted lamp, the pile of cigarettes. I knew that she hoped the view would stimulate him, but it was apparent that he had ceased to think of a story altogether. He spoke of Antoine in his new part, of a book by Anatole France, of the *revue* at Parisiana. Then, in the hall, the telephone bell rang, and Madame rose to receive the message. "Allô! Allô!"

She did not come back. There was a pause, and presently he murmured:

"I wonder if a stranger has been moved to telephone a plot to me!"

"What?" I said.

"It sounds mad, hein? But it once happened — on just such a night as this, when my mind was just as blank. Really! Out of the silence a woman told me a beautiful story. Of course, I never used it, nor do I know if she made use of it herself; but I have never forgotten. For years I could not hear a telephone bell without trembling. Even now, when I am working late, I find myself hoping for her voice."

"The story was so wonderful as that?"

He threw a glance into the study, as if to assure himself that his wife had not entered it from the hall.

"Can you believe that a man may learn to love — tenderly and truly love — a woman he has never met?" he asked me.

"I don't think I understand you."

"There has been only one woman in my life who was all in all to me," he said, "and I never saw her."

How was I to answer? I looked at him.

"After all, what is there incredible in it?" he demanded. "Do we give our love to a face, or to a temperament? I swear to you that I could not have known that woman's temperament more intimately if we had made our confidences in each other's arms. I knew everything of her, except the trifles which a stranger learns in the moment of being presented — her height, her complexion, her name, whether she was married or single. No, those things I never knew. But her tastes, her sympathies, her soul, these, the secret truths of the woman, were as familiar to me as to herself."

He hesitated.

"I am in a difficulty. If I seem to disparage my wife, I shall be a cad; if I let you think we have been as happy together as people imagine, you will not understand the importance of what I am going to tell you. I will say this: before our honeymoon was over, I bored her fearfully. While we were engaged, I had talked to her of my illusions about myself; when we were married, I talked to her of my convictions about my art. The change appalled her. She was chilled, crushed, dumfounded. I looked to her to share my interests. For response, she yawned — and wept.

"Oh, her tears! her hourly tears! the tears that drowned my love!

"The philosopher is made, not born; in the first few years I rebelled furiously. I wanted a companion, a confidante, and I had never felt so desperately alone.

"We had a flat in the rue de Sontay then, and the telephone was in my work-room. One night late, as I sat brooding there, the bell startled me; and a voice — a woman's voice, said:

"'I am so lonely; I want to talk to you before I sleep.'

"I cannot describe the strangeness of that appeal, reaching me so suddenly out of the distance. I knew that it was a mistake, of course, but it was as if, away in the city, some nameless soul had echoed the cry in my own heart. I obeyed an impulse; I said:

"'I, too, am very lonely — I believe I have been waiting for you.'

"There was a pause, and then she asked, dismayed:

"'Who are you?'

"'Not the man you thought,' I told her. 'But a very wistful one.'

"I heard soft laughter. 'How absurd!' she murmured.

"'Be merciful,' I went on; 'we are both sad, and Fate clearly intends us to console each other. It

cannot compromise you, for I do not even know who you are. Stay and talk to me for five minutes.'

"'What do you ask me to talk about?'

"'Oh, the subject to interest us both — yourself.'

"After a moment she answered, 'I am shaking my head.'

"'It is very unfeeling of you,' I said. 'And I have not even the compensation of seeing you do it.'

"Imagine another pause, and then her voice in my ear again:

"'I will tell you what I can do for you — I can tell you a story.'

"'The truth would please me more,' I owned. 'Still, if my choice must be made between your story and your silence, certainly I choose the story.'

"'I applaud your taste,' she said. 'Are you comfortable — are you sitting down?'

"I sat down, smiling; 'Madame —'

"She did not reply.

"Then, 'Mademoiselle —'

"Again no answer.

"'Well, say at least if I have your permission to smoke while I listen to you?'

"She laughed; 'You carry courtesy far!'

"'How far?' I asked quickly.

"But she would not even hint from what neighbourhood she was speaking to me. 'Attend!' she commanded — and began:

"'It is a story of two lovers,' she said, 'Paul and

Rosamonde. They were to have married, but Rosamonde died too soon. When she was dying, she gave him a curl of the beautiful brown hair that he used to kiss. "Au revoir, dear love," she whispered; "it will be very stupid in Heaven until you come. Remember that I am waiting for you and be faithful. If your love for me fades, you will see that curl of mine fade too."

"'Every day through the winter Paul strewed flowers on her tomb, and sobbed. And in the spring he strewed flowers and sighed. And in the summer he paid that flowers might be strewn there for him. Sometimes, when he looked at the dead girl's hair, he thought that it was paler than it had been, but, as he looked at it seldom now, he could easily persuade himself that he was mistaken.

"'Then he met a woman who made him happy again; and the wind chased the withered flowers from Rosamonde's grave, and left it bare. One day Paul's wife found a little packet that lay forgotten in his desk. She opened it jealously, before he could prevent her. Paul feared that the sight would give her pain, and watched her with anxious eyes. But in a moment she was laughing. "What an idiot I am!" she exclaimed. "I was afraid that it was the hair of some girl you had loved!" The curl was snow-white.'

"Her fantastic tale," continued Noulens, "which was told with an earnestness that I cannot reproduce,

impressed me very much. I did not offer any criticism, I did not pay her any compliment; I said simply:

"'Who are you?'

"'That,' she warned me, 'is a question that you must not ask. Well, are you still bored?'

"'No.'

"'A little interested?'

"'Very much so.'

"'I, too, am feeling happier than I did. And now, bonsoir!'

"'Wait,' I begged. 'Tell me when I shall speak to you again.'

"She hesitated; and I assure you that I had never waited for a woman's answer with more suspense while I held her hand, than I waited for the answer of this woman whom I could not see. 'To-morrow?' I urged. 'In the morning?'

"'In the morning it would be difficult.'

"'The afternoon?'

"'In the afternoon it would be impossible.'

"'Then the evening — at the same hour?'

"'Perhaps,' she faltered — 'if I am free.'

"'My number,' I told her, 'is five-five-two-nought-nine. Can you write it now?'

"'I have written it.'

"'Please repeat, so that there may be no mistake.'

"'Five-five-two-nought-nine. Correct?'

" ' Correct. I am grateful.'

" ' Good night.'

" ' Good night. Sleep well.'

" You may suppose that on the morrow I remembered the incident with a smile, that I ridiculed the emotion it had roused in me? You would be wrong. I recalled it more and more curiously: I found myself looking forward to the appointment with an eagerness that was astonishing. We had talked for about twenty minutes, hidden from each other — half Paris, perhaps, dividing us; I had nothing more tangible to expect this evening. Yet I experienced all the sensations of a man who waits for an interview, for an embrace. What did it mean? I was bewildered. The possibility of love at first sight I understood; but might the spirit also recognise an affinity by telephone?

" There is a phrase in feuilletons that had always irritated me —' To his impatience it seemed that the clock had stopped.' It had always struck me as absurd. Since that evening I have never condemned the phrase, for honestly, I thought more than once that the clock had stopped. By-and-by to increase the tension, my wife, who seldom entered my workroom, opened the door. She found me idle, and was moved to converse with me. Mon Dieu! Now that the hour approached at last, ' Madame ' was present, with the air of having settled herself for the night!

"The hands of the clock moved on — and always faster now. If she remained till the bell rang, what was I to do? To answer that I had 'someone with me' would be intelligible to the lady, but it would sound suspicious to my wife. To answer that I was 'busy' would sound innocent to my wife, but it would be insulting to the lady. To disregard the bell altogether would be to let 'Madame' go to the telephone herself! I tell you I perspired.

"Under Providence, our cook rescued me. There came a timid knock, and then the figure of the cook, her eyes inflamed, her head swathed in some extraordinary garment. She had a raging toothache — would madame have the kindness to give her a little cognac? The ailments of the cook always arouse in human nature more solicitude than the ailments of any other servant. My wife's sympathy was active — I was saved!

"The door had scarcely closed when *tr-rr-r-ng* the signal came.

"'Good evening,' from the voice. 'So you are here to meet me.'

"'Good evening,' I said. 'I would willingly go further to meet you.'

"'Be thankful that the rendezvous was your flat — listen to the rain! Come, own that you congratulated yourself when it began! "Luckily I can be gallant without getting wet," you thought. Really, I am most considerate — you keep a dry skin, you

waste no time in reaching me, and you need not even trouble to change your coat.'

"'It sounds very cosy,' I admitted, 'but there is one drawback to it all — I do not see you.'

"'That may be more considerate of me still! I may be reluctant to banish your illusions. Isn't it probable that I am plain — or, at least, elderly? I may even be an authoress, with ink on her fingers. By-the-bye, monsieur, I have been re-reading one of your books since last night.'

"'Oh, you know my name now? I am gratified to have become more than a telephonic address to you. May I ask if we have ever met?'

"'We never spoke till last night, but I have seen you often.'

"'You, at any rate, can have no illusions to be banished. What a relief! I have endeavoured to talk as if I had a romantic bearing; now that you know how I look, I can be myself.'

"'I await your next words with terror,' she said. 'What shock is in store for me? Speak gently.'

"'Well, speaking gently, I am very glad that you were put on to the wrong number last night. At the same time, I feel a constraint, a difficulty; I cannot talk to you frankly, cannot be serious — it is as if I showed my face while you were masked.'

"'Yes, it is true — I understand,' she said. 'And even if I were to swear that I was not un-

worthy of your frankness, you would still be doubtful of me, I suppose.'

"'Madame —'

"'Oh, it is natural! I know very well how I must appear to you,' she exclaimed; 'a coquette, with a new pastime — a vulgar coquette, besides, who tries to pique your interest by an air of mystery. Believe me, monsieur, I am forbidden to unmask. Think lightly of me if you must — I have no right to complain — but believe as much as that! I do not give you my name, simply because I may not.'

"'Madame,' I replied, 'so far from wishing to force your confidence, I assure you that I will never inquire who you are, never try to find out.'

"'And you will talk frankly, unconstrainedly, all the same?'

"'Ah, you are too illogical to be elderly and plain,' I demurred. 'You resolve to remain a stranger to me, and I bow to your decision; but, on the other hand, a man makes confidences only to his friends.'

"There was a long pause; and when I heard the voice again, it trembled:

"'Adieu, monsieur.'

"'Adieu, madame,' I said.

"No sooner had she gone than I would have given almost anything to bring her back. For a long while I sat praying that she would ring again. I watched the telephone as if it had been her window,

the door of her home — something that could yield her to my view. During the next few days I grudged every minute that I was absent from the room.—I took my meals in it. Never had I had the air of working so indefatigably, and in truth I did not write a line. 'I suppose you have begun a new romance?' said my wife. In my soul I feared that I had finished it!"

Noulens sighed; he clasped his hands on his head. The dark hair, the thin, restless fingers were all that I could see of him where I sat. Some seconds passed; I wondered whether there would be time for me to hear the rest before his wife returned.

"In my soul I feared that I had finished it," he repeated. "Extraordinary as it appears, I was in love with a woman I had never seen. Each time that bell sounded, my heart seemed to try to choke me. It had been my grievance, since we had the telephone installed, that we heard nothing of it excepting that we had to make another payment for its use; but now, by a maddening coincidence, everybody I had ever met took to ringing me up about trifles, and agitating me twenty times a day.

"At last, one night — when expectation was almost dead — she called to me again. Oh, but her voice was humble! My friend, it is piteous when we love a woman, to hear her humbled. I longed to take her hands, to fold my arms about her. I

abased myself, that she might regain her pride. She heard how I had missed and sorrowed for her; I owned that she was dear to me.

"And then began a companionship — strange as you may find the word — which was the sweetest my life has held. We talked together daily. This woman, whose whereabouts, whose face, whose name were all unknown to me, became the confidante of my disappointments and my hopes. If I worked well, my thought would be, 'To-night I shall have good news to give her;' if I worked ill —'Never mind, by-and-by she will encourage me!' There was not a page in my next novel that I did not read to her; never a doubt beset me in which I did not turn for her sympathy and advice.

"'Well, how have you got on?'

"'Oh, I am so troubled this evening, dear!'

"'Poor fellow! Tell me all about it. I tried to come to you sooner, but I couldn't get away.'

"Like that! We talked as if she were really with me. My life was no longer desolate; the indifference in my home no longer grieved me. All the interest, the love, the inspiration, I had hungered for, was now given to me by a woman who remained invisible."

Noulens paused again. In the pause I got up to light a cigarette, and — I shall never forget it — I saw the bowed figure of his wife beyond the study

door! It was only a glimpse I had, but the glimpse was enough to make my heart stand still — she leant over the table, her face hidden by her hand.

I tried to warn, to signal to him — he did not see me. I felt that I could do nothing, nothing at all, without doubling her humiliation by the knowledge that I had witnessed it. If he would only look at me!

"Listen," he went on rapidly. "I was happy, I was young again — and there was a night when she said to me, 'It is for the last time.'"

"Six words! But for a moment I had no breath, no life, to answer them.

"'Speak!' she cried out. 'You are frightening me!'

"'What has happened?' I stammered. 'Trust me, I implore you!'

"I heard her sobbing — and minutes seemed to pass. It was horrible. I thought my heart would burst while I shuddered at her sobs — the sobbing of a woman I could not reach.

"'I can tell you nothing,' she said, when she was calmer; 'only that we are speaking together for the last time.'

"'But why — why? Is it that you are leaving France?'

"'I cannot tell you,' she repeated. 'I have had to swear that to myself.'

"Oh, I raved to her! I was desperate. I tried

to wring her name from her then — I besought her to confess where she was hidden. The space between us frenzied me. It was frightful, it was like a nightmare, that struggle to tear the truth from a woman whom I could not clasp or see.

"'My dear,' she said, 'there are some things that are beyond human power. They are not merely difficult, or unwise, or mad — they are impossible. *You* have begged the impossible of *me*. You will never hear me again, it is far from likely we shall ever meet — and if one day we do, you will not even know that it is I. But I love you. I should like to think that you believe it, for I love you very dearly. Now say "good-bye" to me. My arms are round your neck, dear heart — I kiss you on the lips.'

"It was the end. She was lost. A moment before, I had felt her presence in my senses; now I stood in an empty room, mocked by a futile apparatus. My friend, if you have ever yearned to see a woman whose whereabouts you did not know — ever exhausted yourself tramping some district in the hope of finding her — you may realise what I feel; for remember that by comparison your task was easy — I am even ignorant of this woman's arrondissement and appearance. She left me helpless. The telephone had given her — the telephone had taken her away. All that remained to me was the mechanism on a table."

Noulens turned on the couch at last; and, turning,

he could not fail to see his wife. I was spellbound.

"'Mechanism on a table,' he repeated, with a prodigious yawn of relief. 'That is all. If thou hast written it, my own, the story is finished!'"

"Good!" said Madame cheerily. She bustled in, fluttering pages of shorthand. "But I complain, old angel, that the tale of Paul and Rosamonde is thrown away — it is an extravagance, telling two tales for the price of one."

"You are right, my soul. But, on the other hand, thou knowest that I invented it months ago and could not make it long enough for it to be of any use."

"That is true," she agreed. "Well, we will be liberal, then — we will include it!" She noticed my amazement. "What ails our friend?"

Noulens gave a guffaw. "I am afraid our friend did not recognise that I was dictating to you," he chuckled. "By-the-bye, it was fortunate that someone telephoned to us just now — that started my plot for me! Who was it?"

"It was *La Voix*," she laughed, "inquiring if the story would be done in time!"

Oh, yes, indeed, they are comrades, those two, you are certain to hear it! And as often as I hear it myself, I think of what he told me that evening — I remember how he took me in.

"Oh, very proper, very high-minded!" said the financier hurriedly; "a reputation for conscientiousness, of course, is a valuable asset. Have it your own way, my lad. If I'm not to do anything for you in my lifetime, we'll say no more about it."

The curate flushed.

"As a matter of fact," he stammered, "my reason for wishing to see you was to beg you to do something for me. My principles are quite unchanged; I still mean to work among the poor, I'm still resolved to abstain from living among them luxuriously, but — well, circumstances have arisen which — er —— Perhaps I had better tell you everything, as it happened."

"Best way," said Pybus, repressing a groan.

"I was rather seriously unwell some weeks ago, and my Vicar induced me to take a brief holiday. He is always most considerate."

"Any family at the Vicarage?"

"Family? There are his three daughters."

"Ah," murmured the millionaire. "Yes, he would consider you attentively. Go on."

"Some quiet seaside place was preferable, and I went to Eastbourne."

"Eastbourne isn't quiet, it's only depressing — swarms with dogs, and steam-rollers."

"Well, my lodgings were not cheerful, and the weather was unpropitious, so altogether —"

"You got the hump?"

"I was — er — rather — yes. One evening, as it was too wet to take a walk, I attended a performance of *A Crown of Thorns*. Of course, I had heard about it — I knew that it had been approved by organs of the Press that don't mention such things as a rule — but I confess that it amazed me. I found its religious teaching quite as admirable as the historical instruction it afforded — the insight into the life of ancient Rome. It was practically my first visit to a theatre, and a most memorable experience. Perhaps you know the play?"

"Girl holds up a cross in the limelight and the lions are afraid to eat her?"

"No, sir, there are no lions. There are lions in the pictorial advertisements of the play, but they are not actually visible on the stage. It isn't too much to say that I was 'overwhelmed.' I was ashamed of the unreasoning prejudice I had always entertained against theatrical performances."

"You haven't come to ask me to endow a theatre, I hope?" put in the millionaire genially.

"Oh, indeed, not at all sir — the idea had not presented itself to me. Hear me out! The part of the heroine was taken by a lady who possessed such spiritual fervour that, at first, I regretted her choice of a career. How true it is that prejudice dies hard! I grieved — it was narrow of me! — that she was not devoting herself to the propagation of faith among the heathen of our own time, instead of to the

mimic —er — I mean that it seemed to me she was wasting her precious gifts, that she ought to have been a missionary."

"I quite follow you," said Pybus drily.

"I did not recognise the truth at once; but then it came to me — I understood! As I looked round at the eyes wet with tears, I saw that the stage may make for good as powerfully as the pulpit; I saw that this beautiful girl, uttering the grace that was in her to hundreds nightly — I don't know if I mentioned that she has been favoured with remarkable beauty — was stirring the minds of mere pleasure-seekers to the contemplation of higher things; I saw that she was working in the same Cause as myself."

"Great Scott, boy, you've fallen in love with an actress!" exclaimed Pybus. "So that's it?"

"Later I certainly learnt to love her," replied the curate with dignity, "though I don't perceive by what process you have arrived at the fact. I had the happiness to meet her the next afternoon — in the waiting-room at a dentist's — and the passing of a magazine led to conversation."

"Did you tell her that you thought she ought to have been a missionary?"

"I believe I did say something of my earlier regret; and she agreed with me that she was doing equally exalted work on the stage. Perhaps my enlightenment may be partly due to that conversation; her thoughts on the subject were very beautiful.

One answer that she made impressed me deeply; 'Religion and Art,' she said, 'are in reality the same thing.' . . . Without the context it is not so forcible, but when she said it, it was a perfect expression of what we meant, it was most illuminative!"

"How much have you been muddling yourself up with this girl?" asked the financier curtly.

"Sir?"

"I say, how far has it gone? What happened after she illuminated the dentist's?"

"We met often after the dentist's — on the Parade. We used to listen to the town crier together; she found a town crier so quaint; anything that savours of a bygone age appeals to her strongly. Fortunately, too, the Company was going to London — to various theatres in the suburbs — so I was able to see her when I returned, and — and she has consented to be my wife."

"You told her you were my nephew, eh — my heir?"

"I saw no reason for reticence. I trust you have not formed a poor opinion of a lady whom you have never seen?"

"Not at all; I should have a poor opinion of her if she'd refused you under the circumstances. But you're making yourself ridiculous. You've lost your head over an actress; you've taken a queer, clerical way about it, but you've lost your head over an ac-

tress. It won't do, Cuthbert, the thing's absurd!"

Cuthbert had turned very pale.

"I'm sorry to find you so unjust," he groaned. "I had hoped, in view of the many offers you have so kindly made me, that you'd be willing to — to further my happiness. Marriage upon my stipend is impossible, as you know. I trusted to your affection to — to — Why, you've pressed me to take an allowance over and over again!"

"Look here, boy," exclaimed Pybus, "I'm going to talk straight to you! You're the nearest relative I've got, and though you were never the sort I was keen on leaving a million to, I knew you'd waste it in a creditable and conscientious kind of way. Also I'm only fifty, and I hoped you'd have got more sense by the time I died. But this alters matters. I shouldn't leave my money to you if you made a ridiculous marriage, and I don't part with a quid to help you to do it. That's plain English. You can tell her what I've said when you keep the appointment at the stage-door to-night! She can marry you if she likes, but she'll live in Plaistow on what you've got now — there'll be nothing from me."

"And you," observed Cuthbert bitterly, "are called 'a man of the world!' Why, sir, you are displaying all the narrowness of the least sophisticated. She is an actress — and so to wed her must be misfortune! She is an actress —"

"And you're a fool!" said Pybus. "But I don't

want to quarrel with you — I've been there myself — thirty years ago — we've all been there some time. You go to a theatre, you see a pretty woman, and you think you're in love. You're a curate, so your symptoms are a bit complicated, but the complaint's very usual, Cuthbert, believe me — it won't be fatal."

"Will you allow me to introduce her to you?" pleaded Cuthbert. "Will you give me a chance of overcoming your prejudices?"

"No, I won't; I haven't any prejudices. I daresay the girl's right enough — for the right man; but she's a long way from right for you. You don't really suppose she can care about you. You're a good lad, but the last fellow in the world to please an actress. If you hadn't told her you were my nephew, she'd have laughed in your face when you proposed to her."

"I am prepared," said the curate resignedly, "to suffer humiliation if need be."

"Oh, well, I don't want to hurt your feelings. But — er — well, she *would!* I know what actresses are like."

"But you don't know *her*. If you would talk to her once, she would convert you; you would own you were wrong. My life's happiness is at stake. Before you decide, let me bring her to see you. Surely it is no more than fair?"

Pybus picked up the evening papers. "It's no

good going on with it; that's all I've got to say!"

He opened the *Pall Mall.*

"Good night, sir," quavered the curate, extending a hopeless hand.

"Good night, boy," said the financier cordially. "Whenever you want anything in reason let me know."

Cuthbert took a 'bus to Victoria, and arrived at the Shakespeare, Clapham, in ample time. It was still embarrassing to him to loiter at a stage-door; but a man is justified in meeting his fiancée anywhere. He endeavoured to assert this by his bearing when loafers stared at him. Nobody was ever quite so high-minded as Cuthbert tried to look when he waited at stage-doors.

"My own, I have failed," he told her, as they walked to Clapham Junction.

The hand on his arm trembled. "What did he say?"

"He was obdurate; he refused point blank. Why should I pain you by repeating the insults I had to bear?"

"Just because I am an actress!" exclaimed the girl pathetically. "Oh, what we have to put up with, we artists; how uncharitable they are to us! . . . Then it's all over between you and I?"

He winced. But tears were swimming in her lovely eyes; it would have been heartless to mention grammar.

"I cannot lose you," he cried, "I cannot! We might — no, it's out of the question. What's to be done? Angela, I almost lose faith!"

"Hush," she murmured, looking upward; "it may be all for the best, dear — it must be — though it is hard for us to understand it. . . . Do you think he would relent when we were married?"

"I fear not — he would never know you. If he'd let me take you to him, we should succeed, I'm sure — your intelligence and beauty would win him over, though he wouldn't appreciate your soul — but he declined to see you."

"It's a pity I can't be introduced to him as somebody else — go there as a hospital nurse or something. Then when I'd got round him, and he was very grateful to me, I could say, 'my name is Angela Noble — I love your nephew!'"

"It is a sweet idea. But his health is robust, and, besides, he goes abroad very soon."

"That's what *I* shall have to do," she said moodily.

"You?"

"If we don't marry, I must take the engagement for New York; you know I have the offer open — I shall have to close with it."

"New York!" cried Cuthbert. "I hoped you had dismissed the notion." He was meditative. "Angela, I have a daring thought! I will *not* fail!"

Pybus was considerably surprised a day or two later at receiving a pleasant letter from the young man wishing him an agreeable voyage and inquiring by what boat he was to cross; he was considerably irritated at receiving a second letter reminding him of his permission to ask reasonable favours. A lady of the curate's acquaintance was "departing for America, unprotected, by that very vessel." Any act of courtesy that Mr. Pybus would kindly show to the friendless lady, his affectionate nephew would much appreciate. It was added tactfully that, her means precluding speculation, no fear need be entertained of her angling for tips.

Pybus swore, and dictated a gracious note.

And the boat sailed.

Miss Noble unpacked her cabin trunk with the painful consciousness that steamers travelled fast. When she had made the chance remark that inspired her lover, she had been thinking vaguely of a sick-room and plenty of time for womanly gentleness to be admired. "Between Acts II. and III. a month elapses." An Atlantic racer was alarmingly different.

And the uncle was more discouraging still. Every uncle that she had ever known refusing his consent had a white moustache and side whiskers, and was slightly bowed with age and cynicism. Here was a hale and hearty uncle, carelessly good-humoured. Such a person seemed less likely to break up into

slushy sentiment than the iciest cynic that ever sneered. The report that reached Plaistow from Queenstown was not a sanguine one. "There's just this in our favour," she had scribbled: "he has no suspicion who I am, and he can't escape me without jumping overboard. You may bet"— "Bet" had been imperfectly erased — "feel sure I shall do as much in the time as I can. Dear one —" Cuthbert kissed the ship's stationery with enthusiasm.

She was a bright girl — she hasn't been seen to advantage with the curate — and she was working for by far the most profitable engagement of her career; before the first sweepstake on the run she began to play her part in quite another manner than the one she had mentally rehearsed. The spiritual note that Cuthbert had expected of her — to go on being the heroine of *A Crown of Thorns* after the curtain was down — wouldn't catch on here at all, she decided; there was no hit to be made on those lines. Admiration, a wide-eyed homage of the financier's cleverness? Probably all the women he met looked at him like that — it had been played out long ago. The smartest thing would be to treat the middle-aged magnate as if he were an amusing young man.

She did it. It was much easier than being soulful, much less fatiguing. She laughed, she chaffed, she even flirted with him a little. Pybus, who had been prepared to find her a consummate nuisance,

hadn't been on such good terms with himself for years.

The day before they sighted Sandy Hook he said, "I hope I shall see something of you after we land? Are you staying in New York long?"

"I — I hardly know," she answered. "It depends." It depended how he took it when she sprung the truth on him directly; she felt less self-possessed than usual.

"Anyhow, there's my address. If there's anything I can do I shall be glad."

"That's very kind of you! I wonder how much you mean it?" She flashed a glance. "I might ask for something big."

'Ah, I didn't pledge myself to do anything you asked; I said I'd be glad to do anything I could."

"Cautious person!" They were pacing the deck, and they walked in silence for a minute. She was wondering if it would be discreet to delay her confession till they had arrived.

"You're nervy to-day," said Pybus. "You look as if you were going to say you had a headache. It's just the moment for a glass of champagne and a cracker. Let's go below and get them."

'I don't think I care about it, thanks; but you're quite right — I'm nervy. I want to tell you something. Shall we sit down?"

They sat down, and again there was silence.

"Well?" he questioned.

"I don't know how to begin."

"Let me help you," suggested Pybus. "Pull me up if I'm wrong. You are an actress; my nephew Cuthbert thinks he is in love with you; and you came aboard in the hope of persuading me to agree to your marriage. Whether you were going to New York, any how, I don't know; I trust you were, for I should be sorry to have put you to so much inconvenience. Now the beginning is over — proceed!"

Miss Noble had uttered a faint exclamation of astonishment; she stared blankly at the sea.

"You seem surprised," he said. "That isn't flattering to my intelligence. Cuthbert's circle of pretty women is strictly limited, I take it — any doubt that I had of your identity when I got his letter was removed the moment I saw you."

"Oh, then you do think I'm pretty?" faltered Miss Noble.

"You are not a beauty, but your face is pleasing. I say you threw yourself in my way with the intention of convincing me that you were a much nicer girl than I supposed you to be. Am I correct?"

"Quite correct," said Miss Noble in a low voice. "It was an innocent plot."

"It is the favourite one — it has been in the English magazines every month since I was a child. Well, I am convinced. Don't misunderstand me.

I find you brainier, wittier, and nicer in every respect; in fact, you are even more calculated than I assumed to spoil his life."

"Mr. Pybus!"

"Keep your temper — it's a reflection on him, not on you. I'll explain. Cuthbert is my heir *faute de mieux* — which may be translated as 'Because I haven't a son, much as I should like one' — and though I've never pretended he was the apple of my eye, I should regret to see him come to grief. If you were the flabby, phonographic sort of young woman to echo his sentiments and make him happy, I'd say, 'Take him with my sympathy — he's yours!' You're a hundred per cent. too charming for the marriage to be a success. You've come down to his standard very effectually so far, I admit — it must have given you a lot of trouble — but you couldn't hope to impose on him always; before he had discovered half your attractions they'd break his heart."

"I don't know what to say to you. Then — then you refuse?"

"It's a novelty to see you at a loss. Yes, I refuse unhesitatingly. Among the few certainties of life we may count the fact that you'll never marry Cuthbert with any help from me."

"For the reason that you've given me?"

"Among others. If I may say so, for the further reason that I don't wish you to be unhappy,

either. You find him a pill, naturally, and you'd have been bored to death."

"You are despising me," she exclaimed; "you think I'm a mercenary creature without a heart, who —"

"Don't talk to me as if I were Cuthbert. I don't despise you in the least. You are in a very precarious and overcrowded calling, and you'd have married him for position — as hundreds and thousands of fashionable and wealthy girls would be willing to marry him, if I smiled approval — but I know you'd have found him dear at the price. And I have a third reason, though I can assert quite truthfully that the first alone would prevent my consenting. I'd like to marry you myself."

"You?" she gasped.

"Why not? Of course you're not in love with me, but you like me much better than you like him, you can't dispute it. Professionally you are nineteen, I suppose; that's to say you are really about twenty-eight; so I'm two-and-twenty years older than you are. It's a lump, but I'm lively for my age, and if you go on flirting with me you'll make me feel considerably younger. It'll be rough on Cuthbert, I own — my marrying you will cost him about a million. Still, he won't have you in any case; and a hundred and fifty a year would be a great deal more appropriate. Besides, it's entirely his own fault; he should have taken 'no' for an

answer when he came to see me, and then I should never have met you. Think it over. If you regard me as a fairly young man, you needn't hesitate; and if you don't, remember that there's no fool like an old one — that you'll have a very good time."

"You couldn't respect me?" murmured Miss Noble. "You'd feel that I was only marrying the money — that the man didn't matter?"

"I am not without some natural vanity, I assure you. Come, which do you feel more at home with, him or me?"

"You," admitted Miss Noble softly.

"That settles it!" said Pybus. "We'll get Tiffany's to send round some engagements rings in the morning."

XII

FRANKENSTEIN II.

I WAS at the Throne Theatre to see Orlondo Lightfoot's comedy. Entering the buffet, in the first interval, I met Orlando Lightfoot.

"Hallo, old man!" I said. "Congratulations in large quantities."

"Thanks," said the new dramatist. "Have you seen it before?"

"No; but I saw in the papers that it was an 'emphatic success.' How beautiful Elsie Millar is in the part!"

We induced one of the personages behind the bar to notice that we were present, and removed our glasses to a table. Orlando sighed heavily.

"What's your trouble?" I inquired.

"My 'emphatic success,'" he said. "But it's too long a tale to tell you now — I suppose you want to see the second act?"

The vindictiveness with which he pronounced the last two words was startling. I stared at him. "My dear Orlando," I began, but he cut me short.

"Call me 'Frankenstein'!" he groaned. "Like Frankenstein, I've constructed a monster that's de-

stroying me. Before I created this accursed comedy I was a happy man."

"It must have been a very long while before," I said. "When I had the misfortune to share your rooms, you used to remark casually at breakfast that you wished you were dead."

"Anyone is liable to express dissatisfaction in moments; but on the whole I was cheerful and buoyant, especially when you were out," he insisted. "I frequently had as much as five pounds at the time. I'm not boasting; you know it's true. Five pounds at the time is prosperity, if a fellow hasn't got a monster to support. Since I wrote the comedy, a five-pound note has been as ephemeral as a postage stamp. I pinched and pawned to start the monster in life. What it cost me in typewriting alone would have kept me for a month. It has gorged gold. It has devoured my All. And now, by a culminating stroke of diabolical malice, it's breaking my heart."

"There's nearly a quarter of an hour before the act," I said. "Give me a cigarette and the story — I want one badly; an appreciative editor is eager to send a cheque."

"Halves?" asked the author of the "emphatic success."

"Halves," I agreed.

"Well," said Orlando, "the devil tempted me in the pit of the Vaudeville one night. Elsie Millar

was in the cast; she had very little to do, but, as usual, she did it exquisitely! I had always admired her, wished I knew her, and that night I thought, "By Jove, wouldn't I like to write a big part for her! Wouldn't she make a hit if she only got the chance!" I came out after the performance imagining her in the sort of part she's playing in the monster. A plot was beginning to put its head round the corner, and I wandered out of the Strand on to the Embankment trying to get hold of it. The Embankment was deserted, and the river —"

"Yes," I said. "Cut that kind of thing — I can put it in when I do the writing. I don't want to miss any of the second act."

"Well, I went to bed about three o'clock with a plot that enraptured me. When I woke up and saw it in the daylight, it didn't look quite so fetching — as is the way of plots et cetera; still, it had good features, if it wasn't a Venus, and I curled its hair, and titivated it generally, till it was fascinating again. The dialogue was the most interesting work — especially the love scene; I enjoyed that. It was like making love to a nice girl myself, and saying the right things at the time, instead of thinking of 'em afterwards. I ought to have been turning out stuff for the papers, but I let them slide, and at last the play was finished. It sounds as rapid as filling your pipe, told like this; when you do the story you

should stress the alternate ups and downs of the business: the nights when I wrote epigrams and felt like Pinero, and the mornings when I read 'em and felt like cutting my throat. Don't forget that. It's real."

"I'll remember," I said. "I'll have a paragraph on it."

"Well, I had two copies of the thing typewritten at Miss Becks's, in Rupert Street; and pretty they were, tied up with pink bows — till I put in all the improvements I had thought of after I posted to her. The improvements I had thought of after I posted to her made such a mess of the copies that I had to have two more typewritten. However, I couldn't pretend she was dear, and I paid and looked pleasant. Guilelessly, I imagined my expenses were over.

"Sonny, they were just beginning! Miss Becks's bill was only the preface. A man who knew the ropes told me I should be a fool to have the 'script hawked about before it had been copyrighted. 'How do you do it?' I said. 'Oh!' he said, 'it's very easy. You give a private performance of the piece in a building licensed for public entertainments. There are a few details to be observed.' When I grasped the details I knew I had committed a reckless extravagance in writing a play. I examined my belongings, and doubted if they would run to luxuries like this. Still I had con-

structed the monster, and it had its claims. I did my duty by it.

" I hired a hall in Walthamstow for an afternoon. I invented two columns of Fashions for Men to pay for the hall in Walthamstow. Whipping a tired brain, I invented them — and then they fetched eighteenpence short of the rent. I posted one of the nice, clean copies of the monster to the Lord Chamberlain to read. *I* didn't want him to read it — especially since I had learnt the compliment was to cost me guineas — but that was one of the 'details to be observed.' I had to pawn my watch for the Lord Chamberlain. And he didn't even send the nice clean copy back — he buried it in archives. More typewriting expenses! After that I had to have the parts typewritten. My dress clothes paid for the parts. Then I had to advertise for artists to read them. I got my 'artists' cheap — a half-crown a head, but my watch-chain went after my watch, and the monster began to attack my library. 'Any more "details?"' I asked. 'One or two,' said the man; 'you must have a couple of playbills printed, and don't forget to register your title.' Well, I won't dwell on the drinks, but by the time I was through with the Walthamstow hall, and Stationers' Hall, the monster had left nothing in my wardrobe except a mackintosh, and had consumed a complete set of Thackeray bound in calf!"

Orlando groaned again, and I murmured sympathy. I also reminded him that the second act must be drawing near.

"All right!" he said testily. "Listen. The monster was now my legal property — it was about the only property I did have now, but anyhow, the monster was mine. I was informed that an official licence for it would reach me in due course. Admire my next move! An average intellect might have been shattered by the sacrifices I had made for the beast; *I* was still brilliant. Did I send the thing to a theatre uninvited, and wait six months to see it expelled? Not Orlando! I realised that I was an 'outsider.' I realised that I needed someone to take me in. Elsie Millar was playing at the St. James's then. She had never heard of me, but I wrote to her; I said I had written a comedy with her in my mind, and that I'd like her to read it before I offered it to a management."

"What for?"

'What for? Because I thought she might be so enamoured of her part that she'd move mountains to get the piece produced."

"My prolix friend," I said, "I perfectly understand your inward reason; but what was the reason you gave to the lady?"

"Oh!" said Orlando, "I borrowed from a letter that I once knew an actress receive from a full-blown dramatist; I wrote that I was 'desirous of

hearing whether she would care to play the part if an opportunity arose.' Suggestive?"

"For an amateur who had never been through a stage-door it was consummate impudence," I admitted. "And she replied?"

"She replied that she would be pleased to read the piece if I sent it to her private address. It departed to her, registered, the same day. And I wish you wouldn't keep interrupting me! . . . Well, a fortnight went by, a fortnight of suspense that I can't describe to you."

"I don't want you to describe it!" I exclaimed. "For Heaven's sake, remember that the act'll be starting directly. *I'll* describe your feelings when I write the story."

"If you don't write it better than you listen to it, there's a poor show of a cheque," he complained. "I say a fortnight went by. Then she wrote that she had read my comedy and was 'delighted with it!' Look here! if you don't undertake not to speak another word till I've finished, I sha'n't tell you any more. Is it understood?"

I nodded. And for a spell Orlando had it all his own way.

"She wrote that she was 'delighted with it,' and asked me to call on her one day about half-past four. I could hardly believe my eyes. Really, it seemed as if the monster's rancour was exhausted. I felt

tender towards it again, my affection revived. I said that it was like a monster in a fairy tale, transformed to a benevolent presence by the heroine. I thought that a pretty idea; I hoped I should get a chance of mentioning it to Miss Millar when I went.

"Of course, I meant to go the next afternoon — weather permitting — and I was so eager to see what sort of weather it was in the morning that I trembled when I pulled up the blind. Thank Heaven! it was raining. I breakfasted gratefully, and my only fear was that the sun might come out later on. Fortunately it didn't. The drizzle continued, and all was well. By your idiotic expression it's evident you've forgotten that the only decent garment remaining to me was a mackintosh. My suit was socially impossible; if it had been a fine day I couldn't have gone.

"She lives with her mother in a top flat in Chelsea. When I was shown in, she was alone. Her voice was just as sweet as it was on the stage. She isn't a bit like any other actress I've met; she talks rather slowly, and she's very quiet. Even when she enthused about the piece she spoke quietly.

"'I think it's beautiful!' she said. 'I'm glad I asked you to let me read it. I nearly didn't, because —'

"'Because you didn't know my name?' I said.

"'Well, yes!' she said. 'So many people write

to one, and their pieces are generally so impossible. Is this your first, Mr. Lightfoot?'

"'My first, and it has threatened to be my last,' I said. 'I've been copyrighting it, and the complications have nearly ruined me. I had begun to feel myself another Frankenstein with a monster — and then you turned the monster into a prince of light, like Beauty in the fairy tale.'

"It didn't go so well as I had expected, but she smiled a little. 'You'll let me give you some tea?' she said. 'Won't you take off your mackintosh?'

"'No, thanks,' I said; 'it isn't very wet.'

"Then we had tea and cake, and got a bit forrader. She said she wished she had a theatre to produce the thing, and *I* said I wished I had an agent to place it for me. She asked me if I'd like her to show it to Alexander, and *I* said the English language would be inadequate to express the gratitude I'd feel. Of course, I added, she mustn't do all that for nothing, and *she* said she'd find it reward enough to play the part. I said 'Pickles!' then, quite naturally, because she was an exceedingly nice girl, and I liked her. I told her she should have any share of the fees she chose to ask for. 'Oh, nonsense!' she said. 'No, it isn't nonsense!' I said; 'it's only fair.' 'Oh, well, then,' she said, 'if I get the piece done for you anywhere, you shall give me the usual agent's commission. Does *that* satisfy

you? We were talking quite chummily by this time. And I had another cup of tea.

"Before I went, her mother came in. Her mother didn't treat the commission so airily — her mother wanted the girl to have a contract. But that was all right; I put it on paper for her when I got home.

"There was nothing for me to see her about again for two or three months. I had heard from her that Alexander had no use for the piece, and that 'Sir Charles Wyndham had promised to read it on Sunday.' Then she wrote that she was going on tour — and I called to say 'good-bye' to her. There wasn't a cloud in the heavens, and I was still dependent on the mackintosh, but it couldn't be helped. I stayed longer that time. I could have stayed to supper if it hadn't been for the mackintosh!

"Of course she went on working at the business while she was away, and she used to write me what she was doing about it. She was a regular trump, and I liked getting her letters and answering them, though the prospects never came to anything. At last she wrote that she was coming back — and I called to say 'how do you do?' to her. It still hadn't run to a new suit, and — er — I attribute a great deal to that mackintosh! It curtailed all my visits; I haven't had a fair chance with the girl.

"I had never loved before — so quickly; I was

fond of her already. I hope, when you write the story, you'll bring her charm out strong; you had better send the manuscript to me, and I'll put in some of the things she has said — loyal, womanly things, without any grease paint on 'em. As I sat there that afternoon, sweltering in the infernal mackintosh, I knew I'd like to marry her; I knew that if the comedy ever caught on, I'd try to make my agent my wife.

"Well, when a production looked as far off as Klondyke, there came this offer for the piece from Cameron, who had just taken the Throne. She was as excited about it as *I* was.

"'The Throne isn't quite the house I'd have chosen,' she said, 'but you'll get a beautiful cast; Cameron will take pains with the smallest detail, you'll be pleased with everything — Oh! I mustn't answer for your leading lady.'

"I laughed. There was no need for me to tell her I had faith in my leading lady.

"'You *have* given me a chance!' she said. "It'll be the best part I ever played. If this engagement "makes" me, I shall owe it to *you!*' There was one of the things without any grease paint on 'em. Wasn't it sweet? She'd have had every excuse for reminding me all the time what a service she had done me.

"We talked it over like pals. She said that, of course, Cameron would play the Colonel himself,

and that he wanted to get Fairfax for the lover.

"'Who's Fairfax?' I said; 'I don't know him. The lover is an important part — all that pretty scene of yours in the Orchard Act will go for nothing if your lover's not good.'

"'Oh, Fairfax is a very clever young actor!' she said; 'we've never played together, but he has just made a great hit at the Imperial; I saw him there; he was very good indeed!'

"Well, things couldn't have looked more promising. Cameron was enthusiastic — he didn't pay any money on account, but he gave me a cigar — the percentage he agreed to was satisfactory, and the girl I loved considered me her benefactor. Making a discount for disappointment, I hoped for a hundred a week from the Throne; besides that, there'd be the provincial tours, and there were the American, and Colonial rights. I had visions of a house in Sloane Street, and a motor car.

"Then the expenses began again. I couldn't attend daily rehearsals through August in the mackintosh, so I managed to raise a pony on the agreement. The interest was iniquitous, but I was bound to have decent clothes, and on the threshold of a fortune I didn't fuss. I went to a tailor, and I bought a two-guinea panama, and had eighteen pounds left.

"Fairfax turned out to be a plain young man with a big head, and I didn't think so much of his

reading as Miss Millar seemed to do. However, he improved. She, of course, was divine, and Cameron was all right. On the whole I was satisfied with the rehearsals — dramatically; financially they were a shock. The luncheon adjournments upset my calculations. I always had to adjourn with Cameron — though I'd rather have taken Miss Millar — and Cameron lunched extensively. If a man stands you Bollinger one day, you can't offer him Bass the next. I had expected to enjoy the rehearsals, but the eighteen pounds were vanishing at such a rate that I thanked Providence when the last week came.

"Well, by dint of missing a rehearsal or two, I had contrived to cling to a fiver; and I shook hands with myself. I counted on it to keep me going till I got the first fees. Vain dream! They decided to 'try the piece' in Worthing for three nights — and I had to pay fares and an hotel bill! Old chap, when I walked here to the Throne, on the night of the London production, I possessed one shilling — and that went on a drink for the acting manager. In the morning I hadn't the means to buy newspapers with the notices of my own play. Penniless, I read them in a public library among the Unemployed!

"Of course, the notices bucked me up. With an 'emphatic success,' I could smile at being stonebroke till the hundred a week came in. But it didn't

come. The box-office sheets gave me the cold shivers when I saw them, and the queues at the pit and gallery doors were so short that the 'niggers' gave up playing outside. The piece always 'went' very well, but there was never any money in the house; the audience always looked very nice, but none of them had ever paid. They look very nice this evening, don't they? Paper! Paper in rows! Paper in reams!

"A hundred a week? By the first Saturday night I reckoned my week's royalties would about cover the cost of my Worthing trip! And *then* I was optimistic!

"Cameron sent for me; he said:

"'I'm afraid I must take this piece off at once!'

"The dressing-room reeled. I muttered that the notices had been good.

"'It's more than the business is. Look at the booking!' he said.

"I hinted feebly that the best people hadn't come back to town yet.

"He said, 'Well, I'll give it a chance to pick up if in the meantime you like to waive fees.'

"I waived! I heard him in a kind of stupor. . . . I've never had a bob!"

Orlando paused; his head drooped sadly. I ascertained that the barmaids weren't looking, and pressed his hand.

"It's hard lines," I said. "We must have an-

other talk after the show. You won't mind my bolting now? The bell rang ever so long ago; the second act must be half over."

"A curse upon the second act!" he burst out. "Why did I ever write the second act? Don't see it!"

"But I must see it," I urged. "I want to see it. What's the matter with it?"

The dramatist was silent again; I saw that he was struggling with strong emotion. At last he said in a low voice:

"The rest of the story — so far as it has gone — is more painful still. Perhaps you suppose that, now it had stripped me of all and involved me in the meshes of a money-lender, the monster's malignity was appeased? Not so! Pecuniarily it could harm me no more, but through my affections I was still vulnerable; the monster's most insidious injury you've yet to hear.

"I noticed during the rehearsals that Fairfax was struck with Miss Millar; and lately Miss Millar has shown an unaccountable interest in the big-headed Fairfax. I call it 'unaccountable' because Fairfax, in his proper person, can't be said to account for it. She's always saying, how 'tender he is in the part!' The *part's* tender! I own the man can act, but *I* gave him the lines to speak! *I* invented the tender things for him to do. She doesn't remember that.

"Consider what happened when I wrote the piece! I imagined a charming girl in an orchard; I imagined myself in love with her. She had Elsie Millar's face; she answered me with Elsie Millar's voice. With all the tenderness, all the wit, all the fancy I could command I tried to make this charming girl fond of me. Materially, I was producing half-a-dozen pages of dialogue; psychologically, I was lending my own character to any man who played the lover's part.

"It fell to Fairfax! And it's all 'Fairfax' with her. Oh! she has been very sympathetic about my failure, we're still friends, but — there's another man now. She talks more of his performance than of my comedy. It's natural, I suppose — she understands his work better than mine — but I detest the second act; you sha'n't see the second act, the second act's the other man's glamour to her! She's falling in love with the part, and thinks it's with him. The monster gave him his opportunity — and *he's stealing her from me with my own words!*"

"Talk to her as you've talked to me," I said, "and hope still."

"I can't help hoping," he answered, "but —"

An attendant entered the buffet with a note:

"Mr. Lightfoot, sir?"

Orlando tore it open — and passed it to me mutely. I read:

"DEAR MR. LIGHTFOOT,— I hear you are in front to-night. I've been waiting to tell you something all the week. Mr. Fairfax and I are engaged to be married — and we owe our happiness to your play. Will you come round afterwards to let us thank you? — Yours always sincerely,

"ELSIE MILLAR."

"Poor devil!" I exclaimed. "Well, the monster has finished with you now, at any rate! You know that you're disappointed in love; and you know that the last of the expenses is over."

"Y-e-s," he said. . . . "You think your editor *will* send a cheque for the story?"

"'In overdue course,'" I told him. "Why?"

"Well," he moaned, "how am I to find the money to buy her a wedding present?"

XIII

THE TALE THAT WOULDN'T DO

"I CAN tell what's the matter with *you,*" said the Bachelor Girl. "You've got a story to write!"

I had merely shaken hands with her, put down my hat, and chosen a chair by the fire; so I was surprised.

"My dear Sherlock Holmes!" I exclaimed, "this is wonderful. Accustomed as I am to your offensive society, I must own that I fail to see —"

"Nothing could be plainer, my poor Watson," she returned; "I have observed that you never look so unhappy as when you have to do any work."

Like all her deductions, the thing was marvellously simple when she explained it.

Her baptismal name is "Patricia." She is an extraordinarily nice girl, with seventeen faces. She changes them while she talks. There are, her moody face that is almost ugly, and her hopeless face with tragedy in it, and her radiant face that's bewildering — and the fourteen others. If she didn't laugh at orange blossoms, you might approve her.

"Well, it's quite true," I answered; "I *have* a

story to write — or, rather, I haven't a story, and I'm obliged to write one. I want to find a story about love; something piquant and yet tender, with —"

"American or Egyptian?" she asked sharply, passing the cigarettes.

"Egyptian," I said, "but it won't prevent my going on. Something piquant and yet tender, with a note of pathos, and a vein of sentiment, and —"

"Columns of drivel!" she put in. "What do you mean by coming here on a wet day and babbling about sentiment? Don't you know how ill it always makes me? Now, never mind your story; be a good fellow and cheer me up; I haven't met a man for a month."

"*I'm* not a 'man' — I'm married," I mentioned.

"And don't talk to me as if I were a Chiffon Girl, or we shall fall out. Think I want you to flirt with me?"

"I have no illusions left. Besides, I don't believe you could manage to flirt. Did you ever try?"

"Once."

"You don't say so! Was it a success?"

"Tremendous." She nodded. "Biggest joke you ever heard."

"Really?" I said. "Don't get up to make the

tea, then. Keep where you are; and tell me about it."

So she crossed her feet on the fender and told me.

"There was somebody I knew," she said — "Bob. That wasn't his name really, but —"

"We can let him go at 'Bob,'" I agreed; "there's no need to give him away."

"I was only a kid — about nineteen — just beginning to paint. You wouldn't have known me in those days; I was 'utter' — intensely 'utter' — to look at; I used to flop, like the Burne-Jones things; I wore *garments,* and my hair *so!*" She showed me her comedy face, one of the "fourteen others." "He said I was a good fellow when one found me out, and told me not to make a guy of myself. I'd have boxed anybody else's ears, but I liked Dick."

"We re-christened him 'Bob,'" I reminded her.

"Oh, yes. Well, I've let it slip now. It doesn't matter — it was no one you know. He said my clothes and my slang didn't harmonise, and that I was bound to change one or the other. I couldn't change my slang, so I bought a human frock, and he sent me a hundred Nestors as 'A Present for a Good Child.' Don't run away with the idea that I was sentimental about him; we were chums. He used to say the reason he took to me was that I wasn't silly like a girl; he used to say I was the best pal he had. He was only two or three and twenty

— younger than I was in some ways. . . . The poker's *your* side — stir the fire!

"Yes, we were awfully good pals for years. When he went to work in Paris — did I tell you he was an artist? — when he went to work in Paris, I could have howled with loneliness. I *was* so dull! I didn't seem to have anybody to say my best things to. Have you ever missed anyone like that? Something funny would come into my mind, and I'd wish I could say it to him; I'd think, 'Wouldn't it be lovely to be saying it to Dick!' Don't you know the feeling? I don't think I was ever so near to howling as when I'd thought of something funny! . . . I hope you do understand that I wasn't sentimental? If you fancy I felt anything but friendship for him, I sha'n't tell you any more."

"I understand perfectly," I said.

"Of course, we wrote to each other. But I was never good at letters — and, anyhow, what's the use of saying funny things if you can't hear the man laugh? He was away about a year. He had meant to stay for two or three, but one day he wrote that he was coming home sooner than he had expected. He turned up the next afternoon; and it was 'Dick!' and 'Pat!' and 'Well, it *is* good to see you again!' You know! The first few minutes were jolly; then I saw that he was keeping something back.

"I said, 'What you're going to do, is to sit down

there and tell me all about it. You're in trouble, and I want to hear.'

"'What a brick you are!' he exclaimed — a man's always astonished when you notice anything that's as plain as a pillar-box; a woman would have been waiting for me to say it from the moment she came into the room.

"'Is it money?' I said.

"'Well, in a way,' he said, 'it *is* money.'

"He had a small income from somewhere or other, but I had known him hard up for a thick 'un, and I thought perhaps I might be of use. I could have lent him a fiver just then without any bother, as it happened; so I asked him how much he wanted.

"'About a thousand a year,' he answered.

"Well, that told me everything and I couldn't speak for a second. He was only my friend, but he was such a dear, good friend, and I knew it would never be the same thing between us any more. . . .

"'Who is she?' I said.

"That started him, and he gave me a catalogue of her fascinations that made me tired. She was a Chiffon Girl. She had gone over to Paris with his sister, and been taken to see Dick's studio. Tea and twaddle! — he admitted she didn't know anything about art. 'Girlish,' he called her; I could imagine her in the studio — saying an artist's work must be 'such fun,' and calling every picture 'sweet!'

"By what he said, it seemed to me she was treating him pretty badly, for all she was so 'girlish.' She wasn't satisfied to accept him, and she wasn't satisfied to let him go. Didn't want to marry a poor man, but didn't want to lose his admiration. For the last six months he seemed to have been always bidding her an eternal farewell, and getting a note from her about nothing a week afterwards. She was back in London now — that was why he was here. His gush about her gave me a headache.

"'It's a treat to be able to talk it over with you, Pat,' he said.

"'Yes,' I said — 'ripping!'

"He wanted to know if I thought she liked him.

"Well, it was clear she liked him, though whether she liked him enough to live in a fifth-floor flat in West Kensington I had my doubts. But she wasn't nearly good enough for him, that was the main thing. I said:

"'Even if she'll have you, are you sure that you're wise to go in for marriage yet? Don't think I'm speaking selfishly, old man; we shall never forget we were cronies, you and I, and I'll drop in sometimes after you're married and smoke a cigarette with you — if your wife will have me — just the same. It's you I'm thinking of — your own happiness. We've been such real pals, Dick — I know I may talk frankly to you: won't you be ham-

pering your work? Won't you have to sink your ideals, and paint "The New Kittens" and "Baby's First Rattle" to make the pot boil? Are you sure the game's worth the chandler's shop? Girls are good fun at a dance, or to flirt with up the river, but to settle down with one of them for life, dear boy! — a fellow's got to reckon up the cost!'

"Of course, he wouldn't listen — told me I was a confirmed Bachelor Girl, and couldn't understand.

"'If you'd ever been fond of anybody yourself,' he said, 'you'd know that, when one really loves, nothing else matters. I don't mind what I "sink," I don't mind the cost; I want Rosie — she's worth all the pictures in the world.'

"'Sh!' I said, 'don't blaspheme! And, dear old chap, don't think I'm unsympathetic — you asked me for advice, and I gave it you honestly, that's all.'

"'You were always a good sort, Pat,' he said. 'But I didn't ask you for advice — I asked you if you thought she liked me.'

"'Oh, as far as that goes,' I said, 'I dare say you could marry her if you went the right way about it.'

"You should have seen him jump! 'How?'

"'So now you *are* asking me for advice!' I said. 'Well, don't make yourself so cheap, Dick.' (It was horrid to have to tell Dick he had 'made himself cheap'; I hated her for it; but it was true.)

'You've run back to her every time she lifted a finger. Show her you mean what you say. You can offer her a home — of a kind — and you've got a future, if you don't let circumstances spoil it. Very well, then! Tell her she's got to marry you, or say "good-bye" to you once and for all."

"He answered that he *had* told her so.

"'Yes,' I said, 'repeatedly! But tell her so, and stick to what you say. The next time she whistles, don't go. She'll like you twice as much for it.'

"I think it surprised him to find that I understood anything about girls; but I was a girl myself, though he didn't seem to remember it.

"He cheered up wonderfully after that. Funny my coaching him how to win her when I didn't want him to, wasn't it? But he trusted me, and I was bound to play straight with him: I should have been a cad if I hadn't played straight with him when he was trusting me. Still, it was funny, you know — it makes me laugh whenever I think of it."

I detected no amusement in her voice. She paused a moment.

"He dropped in a few days afterwards," she went on, "and told me he had done it. He told me she had said she liked him very much, but didn't want to marry, and that he had wished her 'good-bye.'

"'Don't "come down" in a hurry this time,' I

said; 'when you hear from her next week, send her a few civil lines, and sit tight.'

"Of course he did hear from her — congratulating him on getting into the Academy, and saying she was going to see his picture on Monday afternoon. And when my lady went, he wasn't there. One to Dick!

"It was a black Monday for me, though — I had nothing but 'Rosie' all day long!

"And that was only the beginning of it. She didn't make another move for two or three months, and he thought he had lost her. He weakened then. He told me he used to tramp the room, thinking, half the night. His sister and I were the only people who knew — and his sister had gone to Pangbourne, so I got it all. Rather rough on me! But I was awfully sorry for him — I *was* sorry for him! His eyes in the morning!

"Then the girl made another step — she fished for an invitation to spend a week at Pangbourne. By that time he was in such a fever that he wanted to propose to her again as soon as she arrived, but his sister said 'No'; she said the best thing he could do was to make the girl fancy he was getting over it. I don't know how much trouble she had with him, but she rubbed her idea in pretty thoroughly, for he came and asked me to help him.

"He said, 'Alice thinks' — Alice was his sister's name; he said, 'Alice thinks I ought to be down

there when Rosie comes, and pretend I don't mind any more.'

"'If you go at all,' I said, 'that *is* what you ought to do at first.'

"He said, 'She thinks if Rosie once saw me making up to somebody else, it'd be all right.'

"'Well, I always told you that you had let her feel too sure of you,' I said.

"'The only thing is,' he said, 'there's no other girl there. Will *you* come down and see me through, Pat?'

"I did flare out then! To ask me to — I mean it did seem — Well, it was a little too much!

"He was all apologies in a minute. I never saw a man so taken aback in all my life. 'No idea of offending me — I had been such a pal that he didn't imagine I'd cut up rough.' Said he had asked me as he might have asked Alice, only as Alice was his sister she'd be no use. He kept saying how sorry he was to have annoyed me — and looked amazed!

"Well, in the end I said I'd go. If you had heard him you'd understand — it was such a trifle, in the way he put it, and it seemed so strange of me to make a fuss. 'Oh,' I said, 'I don't care — I'll go down and talk with you if you like! Why not?'

"So I went. He treated Rosie beautifully — a nice friendly manner that widened her eyes. Blue eyes — and a dolly complexion, and flaxen hair; she only needed the ticket — 'My clothes take off!'

But she was very pretty — nothing to find fault with, excepting that she hadn't a brain. Alice had invited a man who didn't count to take her in to luncheon, and Dick took *me*. Rosie was displeased with me at luncheon. Afterwards Dick showed me the garden, and I brought him back with a flower in his buttonhole. Rosie was worried. During the evening, in the moonlight, I said pensively it must be divine on the water now — and Rosie looked as if she hoped I'd be drowned.

"We were away about an hour. Curious — we had never been on the river together before. He didn't bore me too much about her; he talked of his work, and mine, and — we had a lot in common! . . . It was about the last time we really did have a talk together.

"Oh, well, he had the game in his hands from the beginning! Before we had been down there two days he told me they were engaged.

"'Hurrah!' I said. 'Good luck to you, old man!'

"'You've been a trump,' he said; 'if it hadn't been for you, she might never have known her own heart. I'm so grateful to you, Pat, I'd like to kiss you.'

"'Oh, rats!' I said — 'I don't go in for sentiment.'"

The Bachelor Girl's voice trembled. She paused again.

"I *had* flirted, though," she added defiantly, "when Rosie was watching; and it was a great joke. They were married in the autumn. I never see him now, but he's selling 'The New Kittens' and 'Baby's First Rattle' for big prices. . . . It's time we had tea. Well, you wanted to think of a tale, and you've been told one instead. Not that it would do for you — it isn't pathetic."

"It wouldn't do at all," I said, "it's very humorous."

And I looked at the fire as I answered, because I knew she was crying.

XIV

THE DRESS CLOTHES OF MONSIEUR POMPONNET

It was thanks to Touquet that she was able to look so chic — the little baggage! — yet of all her suitors Touquet was the one she favoured least. He was the costumier at the corner of the Rue des Martyrs, and made a very fair thing of the second-hand clothes. It was to Touquet's that the tradesmen of the Quarter turned as a matter of course to hire dress-suits for their nuptials; it was in the well-cleaned satins of Touquet's that the bride's mothers and the lady guests cut such imposing figures when they were photographed after the wedding breakfasts; it was even Touquet who sometimes supplied a gown to one or another of the humble actresses at the Théâtre Montmartre, and received a couple of free tickets in addition to his fee. I tell you that Touquet was not a person to be sneezed at, though he had passed the first flush of youth, and was never an Adonis.

Besides, who was she, this little Lisette, who had the impudence to flout him? A girl in a florist's, if you can believe me, with no particular beauty herself, and not a sou by way of dot! And yet — one

must confess it — she turned a head as swiftly as she made a "buttonhole"; and Pomponnet, the pastry-cook, was paying court to her, too — to say nothing of the homage of Messieurs Tricotrin, the poet, and Goujaud, the painter, and Lajeunie, the novelist. You would never have guessed that her wages were only twenty francs a week, as you watched her valse with Tricotrin at the ball on Saturday evening, or as you saw her enter Pomponnet's shop, when the shutters were drawn, to feast on his strawberry tarts. Her costumes were the cynosure of the Boulevard Rochechouart!

And they were all due to Touquet, Touquet the infatuated, who lent the fine feathers to her for the sake of a glance, or a pressure of the hand — and wept on his counter afterwards while he wondered whose arms might be embracing her in the costumes that he had cleaned and pressed with so much care. Often he swore that his folly should end — that she should be affianced to him, or go shabby; but, lo! in a day or two she would make her appearance again, to coax for the loan of a smart blouse, or "that hat with the mass of geraniums and the brilliant buckle"— and Touquet would be as weak as ever.

Judge, then, of his despair when he heard that she had agreed to marry Pomponnet! She told him the news with the air of an amiable gossip when she came to return a ball-dress that she had borrowed.

"Enfin," she said — perched on the counter, and swinging her remorseless feet — "it is arranged; I desert the flowers for the pastry, and become the mistress of a shop. I shall have to beg from my good friend monsieur Touquet no more — not at all! I shall be his client, like the rest. It will be better, hein?"

Touquet groaned. "You know well, Lisette," he answered, "that it has been a joy to me to place the stock at your disposal, even though it was to make you more attractive in the eyes of other men. Everything here that you have worn possesses a charm to me. I fondle the garments when you bring them back; I take them down from the pegs and dream over them. Truly! There is no limit to my weakness, for often when a customer proposes to hire a frock that you have had, I cannot bear that she should profane it, and I say that it is engaged."

"You dear, kind monsieur Touquet," murmured the coquette; "how agreeable you are!"

"I have always hoped for the day when the stock would be all your own, Lisette! And by-and-by we might have removed to a better position — even down the hill. Who knows? We might have opened a business in the Madeleine Quarter! That would suit you better than a little cake shop up a side street? And I would have risked it for you —

I know how you incline to fashion. When I have taken you to a theatre, did you choose the Montmartre — where we might have gone for nothing — or the Belleville? Not you — that might do for other girls! *You* have always demanded the theatres of the Grands Boulevards; a cup of coffee at the Café de la Paix is more to your taste than a bock and three hard-boiled eggs at 'The Purple Monkey.' Heaven knows I trust you will be happy, but I cannot persuade myself that this Pomponnet shares your ambitions; with his slum and his stale pastry he is quite content."

"It is not stale," she said.

"Well, we will pass his pastry — though, word of honour, I bought some there last week that might have been baked before the Commune; but to recur to his soul, is it an affinity?"

"Affinities are always hard up," she pouted.

"Bah!" exclaimed Touquet, "now your mind is running on that monsieur Tricotrin — by 'affinities' I do not mean hungry poets! Why not have entrusted your happiness to *me?* I adore you; I have told you a thousand times that I adore you. Lisette, consider before it is too late! You cannot love this — this obscure baker?"

She gave a shrug. "It is a fact that devotion has not robbed me of my appetite," she confessed. "But what would you have? His business goes far

better than you imagine — I have seen his books; and, anyhow, my sentiment for you is friendship, and no more."

"To the devil with friendship!" cried the unhappy wardrobe-dealer; "did I dress you like the Empress Josephine for friendship?"

"Do not mock yourself of it," she said reprovingly; "remember that 'Friendship is a beautiful flower, of which esteem is the stem.'" And, having thrown the adage to him, coupled with a glance that drove him to distraction, the little flirt jumped off the counter and was gone.

Much more reluctantly she contemplated parting with him whom the costumier had described as a "hungry poet"; but matrimony did not enter the poet's scheme of things, nor for that matter had she ever regarded him as a possible parti. Yet a woman may give her fancy where her reason refuses to follow, and when she imparted her news to Tricotrin there was no smile on her lips.

"We shall not go to balls any more, old dear," she said. "Monsieur Pomponnet has proposed marriage to me — and I range myself."

"Heartless girl," exclaimed the young man, with tears in his eyes. "So much for woman's constancy!"

"Mon Dieu," she faltered, "did you then love me, Gustave — really?"

"I do not know," said Tricotrin, "but since I

am to lose you, I prefer to think so. Oh, do not grieve for me — fortunately, there is always the Seine! And first I shall pour my misery into song; and in years to come, fair daughters at your side will read the deathless poem, little dreaming that the Lisette I sang to is their mother. Some time — long after I am in my grave, when France has honoured me at last — you may stand before a statue that bears my name, and think, 'He loved me, and I broke his heart!'"

"Oh," she whimpered, "rather than break your heart I — I might break the engagement! I might consider again, Gustave."

"No, no," returned Tricotrin, "I will not reproach myself with the thought that I have marred your life; I will leave you free! Besides, as I say, I am not certain that I should want you so much but for the fact that I have lost you. After all, you will not appreciate the poem that immortalises you, and if I lived, many of your remarks about it would doubtless infuriate me."

"Why shall I not appreciate it? Am I so stupid?"

"It is not that you are stupid, my Soul," he explained; "it is that I am transcendentally clever. To understand the virtues of my work one must have sipped from all the flowers of Literature; 'There is to be found in it Racine, Voltaire, Flaubert, Renan — and always Gustave Tricotrin,' as

Lemaître has written. He wrote, '— and always Anatole France,' but I paraphrase him slightly. So you are going to marry Pomponnet? Mon Dieu, when I have any sous in my pocket, I will ruin myself for the rapture of regretting you among the pastry!"

"I thought," she said, a little mortified, "that you were going to drown yourself?"

"Am I not to write my Lament to you? I must eat while I write it — why not pastry? Also, when I am penniless and starving, you may sometimes, in your prosperity — And yet, perhaps, it is too much to ask?"

"Grant you credit, do you mean? Oh, yes, Gustave, how can you doubt that I will do that? In memory of —"

"In memory of the love that has been, you will allow me to run up a small score for cakes, will you not, Lisette?"

"I will, indeed!" she promised. "But, but — Oh, it's quite true, I should never understand you! A minute ago you made me think of you in the Morgue, and now you make me think of you in the cake shop. What are you laughing at?"

"I laugh, like Figaro," said Tricotrin, "that I may not be obliged to weep. When are you going to throw yourself away, my little Lisette? Has my accursed rival induced you to fix a date?"

"We are to be married in a fortnight's time,"

she said. "And if you could undertake to be sensible, I would ask Alphonse to invite you to the breakfast."

"In a fortnight's time hunger and a hopeless passion will probably have made an end of me," replied the poet; "however, if I survive, the breakfast would certainly be welcome. Where is it to be held? I can recommend a restaurant that is especially fine at such affairs, and most moderate. 'Photographs of the party are taken gratuitously in the Jardin d'Acclimatation, and pianos are at the disposal of the ladies;' I quote from the menu — I study it in the window every time I pass. There are wedding breakfasts from six to twelve francs per head. At six francs, the party have their choice of two soups and three hors d'œuvres. Then comes 'poisson'— I fear it may be whiting — filet de bœuf with tomates farcies, bouchées à la Reine, chicken, pigeons, salad, two vegetables, an ice, assorted fruits, and biscuits. The wines are madeira, a bottle of mâcon to each person, a bottle of bordeaux among four persons, and a bottle of champagne among ten persons. Also coffee and liqueurs. At six francs a head! It is good, hein? At seven francs there is a bottle of champagne among every eight persons — Pomponnet will, of course, do as he thinks best. At eight francs, a bottle is provided for every six persons. I have too much delicacy to make suggestions, but should he be willing to soar to twelve

francs a head, I might eat enough to last a week — and of such quality! The soups would then be bisque d'écrevisse and consommé Rachel. Rissoles de Foies gras would appear! Asparagus 'in branches,' and compote pêches marasquin would be included. Also, in the twelve-franc breakfast, the champagne begins to have a human name on the label!"

Now, it is not certain how much of this information Lisette repeated to Pomponnet, but Pomponnet, having a will of his own, refused to entertain M. Tricotrin at any price at all. Moreover, he found it unconventional that she should desire the poet's company, considering the attentions that he had paid her; and she was forced to listen, with an air of humility which she was far from feeling, to a lecture on the responsibilities of her new position.

"I am not a jealous man," said the pastrycook, who was as jealous a man as ever baked a pie, "but it would be discreet that you dropped this acquaintance now that we are engaged. I know well that you have never taken the addresses of such a fellow seriously, and that it is only in the goodness of your heart you wish to present him with a blow-out. Nevertheless, the betrothal of a man in my circumstances is much remarked; all the daughters of the hairdresser next door have had their hopes of me — indeed, there is scarcely a neighbour who is not chagrined at the turn events have taken — and the

world would be only too glad of an excuse to call me 'fool.' Pomponnet's wife must be above suspicion. You will remember that a little lightness of conduct which might be forgiven in the employée of the florist would be unseemly in my fiancée. No more conversation with monsieur Tricotrin, Lisette! Some dignity — some coldness in the bow when you pass him. The Boulevard will observe it, it will be approved."

"You, of course, know best, my dear Alphonse," she returned meekly; "I am only an inexperienced girl, and I am thankful to have your advice to guide me. But let me say that never, never has there been any 'lightness of conduct' to distress you. Monsieur Tricotrin and I have been merely friends. If I have gone to a ball with him sometimes — and I acknowledge that has happened — it has been because nobody more to my taste has offered to take me." She had ground her little teeth under the infliction of his homily, and it was only by dint of thinking hard of his profits that she abstained from retorting that he might marry all the daughters of the hair-dresser and go to Uganda.

However, during the next week or so, she did not chance to meet the poet on the Boulevard, and since she wished to conquer her tenderness for him, one cannot doubt that all would have been well but for the editor of *Le Demi-Mot*. By a freak of fate, the Editor of *Le Demi-Mot* was moved to invite M.

Tricotrin to dine at his house two days previous to the wedding. What followed? Naturally Tricotrin must present himself in evening dress. Naturally, also, he must go to Touquet's to hire the suit.

"Regard," said the costumier, "here is a suit that I have just acquired. Monsieur will observe that it is of the most distinguished cut — quite in the latest fashion. I will whisper to Monsieur that it comes to me through the valet of the Comte de Château-Leroy!"

"Mon Dieu," said Tricotrin, "let me try it on!" And he was so gratified by his appearance in it that he barely winced at the thought of the expense. "I am improving my position," he soliloquised; "if I have not precisely inherited the mantle of Victor Hugo, I have, at any rate, hired the dress-suit of the Comte de Château-Leroy!"

Never had a more impressive spectacle been witnessed in Montmartre than Tricotrin's departure from his lodging in the rue des Trois Frères shortly after six o'clock. Wearing a shirt of Pitou's, Flamant's patent-leather boots, and a white tie contributed by Goujaud, the young man sallied forth with the deportment of the Count himself. Only one thing more did he desire, a flower for his buttonhole — and Lisette remained in her situation until the morrow! What more natural, finally, than that he should hie to the florist's?

It was the first time that she had seen her lover in evening dress, and sentiment overpowered her as he entered.

"Thou!" she murmured, paling.

On the poet, too, the influence of the clothes was very strong; attired like a jeune premier, he craved with all the dramatic instinct of his nature for a love scene; and, instead of fulfilling his intention to beg for a rosebud at cost price, he gazed at her soulfully, and breathed "Lisette!"

"So we have met again!" she said.

"The world is small," returned the poet, ignoring the fact that he had come to the shop. "And am I yet remembered?"

"It is not likely I should forget you in a few days," she said, more practically; "I didn't forget about the breakfast, either, but Alphonse put his foot down."

"Pig!" said the poet. "And yet it may be better so! How could I eat in such an hour?"

"However, you are not disconsolate this evening?" she suggested. "Mon Dieu, what a swell you are!"

"Bah! some fashionable assembly that will bore me beyond endurance!" he sighed. "With you alone, Lisette, have I known true happiness — the tram rides on summer nights that were joyous because we loved, the simple meals that were sweetened by your smiles!"

"Oh, Gustave!" she said. "Wait, I must give you a flower for your coat!"

"I shall keep it all my life!" vowed Tricotrin. "Tell me, little one — I dare not stay now, because my host lives a long way off — but this evening, could you not meet me once again? For the last time, to say farewell? I have nearly two francs fifty, and we might go to supper, if you agree."

It was arranged before he took leave of her that she should meet him outside the *débit* at the corner of the rue de Sontay at eleven o'clock, and sup with him there, in a locality where she was unlikely to be recognised. Rash enough, this conduct, for a young woman who was to be married to another man on the next day but one! But a greater imprudence was to follow. They supped, they sentimentalised, and when they parted in the Champs Elysées and the moonshine, she gave him from her bosom a little rose-coloured envelope that contained nothing less than a lock of her hair.

The poet placed it tenderly in his waistcoat pocket; and, after he had wept, and quoted poetry to the stars, forgot it. He began to wish that he had not mixed his liquors quite so impartially; and, on the morrow, when he woke, he was mindful of nothing more grievous than a splitting headache.

Now Touquet, who could not sleep of nights because the pastrycook was going to marry Lisette, made a practice of examining the pockets of all gar-

ments returned to him, with an eye to stray sous; and when he proceeded to examine the pockets of the dress-suit returned by M. Tricotrin, what befell but that he drew forth a rose-tinted envelope containing a tress of hair, and inscribed, "To Gustave, from Lisette. Adieu."

And the editor who invited M. Tricotrin had never heard of Lisette; never heard of Pomponnet; did not know that such a person as Touquet existed; yet the editorial caprice had manipulated destinies. How powerful are editors! How complicated is life!

But a truce to philosophy — let us deal with the emotions of the soul! The shop reeled before Touquet. All the good and the bad in his character battled tumultuously. In one moment he aspired to be generous and restore to Lisette the evidence of her guilt; in the next he sank to the base thought of displaying it to Pomponnet and breaking off the match. The discovery fired his brain. No longer was he a nonentity, the "odd man out"— chance had transformed him to the master of the situation. Full well he knew that there would be no nuptials next day were Pomponnet aware of his fiancée's perfidy; it needed but to go to him, to say, "Monsieur, my sense of duty compels me to inform you —" How easy it would be! He laughed hysterically.

But Lisette would never pardon such a meanness

— she would always despise and hate him! He would have torn her from his rival's arms, it was true, yet his own would still be empty. "Ah, Lisette, Lisette!" groaned the wretched man; and, swept to evil by the force of passion, he cudgelled his mind to devise some piece of trickery, some diabolical artifice, by which the incriminating token might be placed in the pastrycook's hands as if by accident.

And while he pondered — his "whole soul a chaos" — in that hour Pomponnet entered to hire a dress-suit for his wedding!

Touquet raised his head, blanched to the lips.

"Regard," he said, with a forced calm terrible to behold; "here is a suit that I have just acquired. Monsieur will observe that it is of the most distinguished cut — quite in the latest fashion. I will whisper to monsieur that it comes to me through the valet of the Comte de Château-Leroy." And, unseen by the guileless bridegroom, he slipped the damning proof into a pocket of the trousers, where his knowledge of the pastrycook's attitudes assured him that it was even more certain to be found than in the waistcoat.

"Mon Dieu!" said the other, duly impressed by the suit's pedigree; "let me try it on. . . . "The coat is rather tight," he complained, "but it has undeniably an air!"

"No more than one customer has worn it,"

gasped the wardrobe dealer haggardly: "*monsieur Gustave Tricotrin, the poet, who hired it last night!* The suit is practically new; I have no other in the establishment to compare with it. Listen, monsieur Pomponnet! To an old patron like yourself, I will be liberal; wear it this evening for an hour in your home — if you find it not to your figure, there will be time to make another selection before the ceremony to-morrow. You shall have this on trial, I will make no extra charge."

Such magnanimity was bound to have its effect, and five minutes later Touquet's plot had progressed. But the tension had been frightful; the door had scarcely closed when he sank into a chair, trembling in every limb, and for the rest of the day he attended to his business like one moving in a trance.

Meanwhile, the unsuspecting Pomponnet reviewed the arrangement with considerable satisfaction; and when he came to attire himself, after the cake shop was shut, his reflected image pleased him so well that he was tempted to stroll abroad. He decided to call on his betrothed, and to exhibit himself a little on the Boulevard. Accordingly, he put some money in the pocket of the waistcoat, oiled his silk hat, to give it an additional lustre, and sallied forth in high good-humour.

"How splendid you look, my dear Alphonse!" exclaimed Lisette, little dreaming it was the same

suit that she had approved on Tricotrin the previous evening.

Her innocent admiration was agreeable to Pomponnet; he patted her on the cheek.

"In truth," he said carelessly, "I had forgotten that I had it on! But I was so impatient for to-morrow, my pet angel, that I could not remain alone, and I had to come to see you."

They were talking on her doorstep, for she had no apartment in which it would have been *convenable* to entertain him, and it appeared to him that the terrace of a café would be more congenial.

"Run upstairs and make your toilette, my loving duck," he suggested, "and I shall take you out for a tasse. While you are getting ready, I will smoke a cigar." And he drew his cigar-case from the breast-pocket of the coat, and took a match-box from the pocket where he had put his cash.

It was a balmy evening, sweet with the odour of spring, and the streets were full of life. As he promenaded with her on the Boulevard, Pomponnet did not fail to remark the attention commanded by his costume. He strutted proudly, and when they reached the café and took their seats, he gave his order with the authority of the President.

"Mon Dieu!" he remarked, "it is pleasant here, hein?" And then, stretching his legs, he thrust both his hands into the pockets of his trousers. "*Comment?*" he murmured. "What have I

found? . . . Now is not this amusing — I swear it is a billet-doux!" He bent, chuckling, to the light — and bounded in his chair with an oath that turned a dozen heads towards them. "Traitress," roared Pomponnet, "miserable traitress! It is *your* name! It is your *writing!* It is your *hair!* Do not deny it; give me your head — it matches to a shade! Jezebel, last night you have met monsieur Tricotrin — you have deceived me!"

Lisette, who had jumped as high as he in recognising the envelope, sat like one paralysed now. Her tongue refused to move. For an instant, the catastrophe seemed to her of supernatural agency — it was as if a miracle had happened, as she saw her fiancée produce her lover's keepsake. All she could stammer at last was:

"Let us go away — pay for the coffee!"

"I will not pay," shouted M. Pomponnet. "Pay for it yourself, jade — I have done with you!" And, leaving her spellbound at the table, he strode from the terrace like a madman before the waiters could stop him.

Oh, of course, he was well known in the café, and they did not detain Lisette, but it was a most ignominious position for a young woman. And there was no wedding next day, and everybody knew why. The little coquette, who had mocked suitors by the dozen, was jilted almost on the threshold of the Mairie. She smacked Tricotrin's face in the morn-

ing, but her humiliation was so acute that it demanded the salve of immediate marriage; and at the moment she could think of no one better than Touquet.

So Touquet won her after all; and though by this time she may guess how he accomplished it, he will tell you — word of honour! — that never, never has he had occasion for regret.

XV

THE CALL FROM THE PAST

ONCE there was a prosperous solicitor, and he had two sons. The elder he took into his office; the younger he sent to the Bar. The younger boy's name was Robert, and he was generally called "Bob." The elder boy's name was Edward, and no one ever called him "Ted."

Edward went to the office with satisfaction. He was a shrewd youth who made useful friends, and didn't allow pleasure to stand in the way of profit. Before he had been in the business two years he bullied the head clerk, and it was predicted that he would "go further than his father." Bob entered his profession negligently. He was a genial fellow who liked bohemian clubs, and wrote farces that were never produced. Before he had been at the Bar two years he succumbed to an unconquerable passion and went on the stage.

The stage had not then become the smartest vocation in England. Viscounts occasionally married dancing-girls, but socially that was as high as the theatre had climbed. It may be difficult for English people of to-day to credit it, but though old Mr.

Blackstone was simply a solicitor, he felt humiliated when his son "took to play-acting." What will be understood more easily, is that he was wrathful in thinking of the money he had wasted to make a barrister of a crank. He told the crank that he washed his hands of him, and as a matter of fact talked rather like the irate parents in the comedies in which Bob was going to perform.

Nevertheless his growl was worse than his bite — in which he resembled the comedy parents again. Ascertaining that Bob's salary was to be fifteen shillings a week, and that the histrionic career was precarious, he undertook to provide him with the sum of forty pounds a year, payable quarterly, for the term of three years. "At the end of which time," he said, "I think you ought to be able to support yourself, if you have really any aptitude as a buffoon."

Bob was of the same opinion. Don't laugh at him, he was young. He slammed the door of his chambers rejoicing, and — because his father wished him to change his name — he dropped the "Blackstone" and called himself "Lawless." The old man remarked that "Senseless" would be better still, but Bob thought not.

Now if this had been a nice, edifying story, with a Moral presented gratis to every purchaser, Bob would have had only two courses open to him. He would either have succeeded brilliantly and moved

his father to tears of pride, or he would have found the discomforts unbearable and returned repentant. In reality he didn't succeed at all, and he had never been so happy in his life.

His sole regret was that the tour was short, for when it finished he was out of an engagement. He remained out of an engagement much longer than he had been in one, and subsisted on the parental allowance. The change from the fleshpots of Regent's Park was severe, and if anything could have cooled his stage fever, it would have been cooled now, but it defied even semi-starvation. By-and-by he obtained another small part, and his temperature was higher still. Naturally he assured himself that by the time the allowance was withdrawn he would be independent of it. And that was where he erred.

At the end of the three years he was pacing the Strand. He had had hard luck, and old Mr. Blackstone was hard too. He stuck to his guns; Bob must shift by his own abilities henceforward, or Bob must go back to the Bar. Bob was footsore, hungry and penniless; Bob went back to the Bar.

Of course there was still his pen. His hopes as an actor had been shivered, but to his ambitions as a dramatist he clung. It was the spar in the shipwreck. The night was black, but afar the footlights beamed. Buffeted as he was, he might regain them by his pen.

So he wrote more farces — farces, and bur-

lesques, and one or two melodramas as well. His father did not know that. Robert Blackstone, the budding barrister, preserved appearances; and Robert Lawless, the panting playwright, preserved his manuscripts — for they all came back. All, that is to say, with the exception of a farcical comedy which he had actually sold for twenty-five pounds but which had never been staged. Some of his work was good, but in England the chief qualifications for artistic success are commercial ability, and the money to exploit it; Bob lacked both. By degrees he became weary of trying to reach the limelit shore, his struggles grew fainter; by degrees "Robert Lawless" took some interest in Robert Blackstone. He thought of the Bar more, and of the Theatre less. One day when his father told him he had "handled the brief uncommonly well," he was elated. He was nine-and-twenty now.

Robert Blackstone had begun to cut "Robert Lawless" out — was travelling faster, proving the better of the pair. And "Lawless," who felt rather sore about it at first, presently forgave him. Bob began to look less like a Bob and more like a Robert. People noticed "what a strong resemblance there was between him and his brother." As an earnest young barrister he no longer frequented bohemian clubs. It was understood that one mustn't go round to Plowden Buildings any more and waste his time. Nobody said to him now,

"Come and have a drink, old chap!" Occasionally someone might say, "Will you — er — take a glass of sherry, Mr. Blackstone?"

As the years passed, even that was seldom said. He had shaken off the dust of Plowden Buildings, and had chambers in Garden Court. His humour was becoming heavy. The mothers of marriageable daughters found it convulsing. He was spoken of as a man with a future, and dined at dreary houses. Old Blackstone died, and as Robert was making a handsome income he was mentioned in the will with abundant generosity. Wherefore he was rich. So was Edward the solicitor, who had a wife and three children now. Edward was proud of his brother; he wanted him to take silk, and to stand for Beckenhampton later. Robert was thinking of these things himself. His age was forty-one. And here ends the prologue.

So we see that this unedifying story may be said to begin at a point long after all orthodox stories have concluded — it really begins twelve years after the prodigal reformed. Reformation, we know, is always final — in stories. When the prodigal has once returned to the odour of sanctity we are quite sure that he will never desire change of air; we understand that he will always be just as good and peaceful as we leave him on the last page. Human nature is made like that — in stories.

One May afternoon, as Robert came out of

Court, a man murmured to another, "He's a dry stick is Blackstone!" Robert overheard, and he smiled his dry smile. Yes, he supposed that was his social reputation at the Bar. As he joined Edward, and listened to his pleased comments on the jury's finding, he even admitted to himself that the reputation might be deserved. Odd! how very different from a "dry stick" he had been once.

Edward was animated — for Edward. He kept nodding his grey head, and pinched his nose repeatedly between his forefinger and thumb, a habit that he had in conversation. They stood talking in the street for about ten minutes. It occurred to Robert with a touch of faint surprise that he had long ceased to shirk his brother's company; yet there was no doubt that Edward was quite as dull a dog as he had ever been. As they talked there, outside the Law Courts, Robert compassionated himself a little for not being bored by Edward.

He had been cheerful as he unrobed, but the remark he had caught lurked in his ears, and when he entered his chambers he found himself repeating it. "For the defendant," a pleasant phrase to-day, was momentarily forgotten; "A dry stick" sounded in his mind instead. He, "Bob," had actually become a "dry stick!"

And he was only forty-one. He lit a cigarette, and mused. Beyond the open window the flowers of the garden were bright in sunshine, and the foun-

tain tinkled dreamily. There was a nursemaid with a child among the flowers; he wondered, for a moment, whether he would have done well to marry.

Marvellous, in looking back, how suddenly success had come! — marvellous to remember how hard he had had to flog his brain at the beginning to earn a legal guinea; if one managed to turn the second corner at the Bar at all, one sped on with a rush. But how unlikely it had looked that he would ever turn that corner!

How unlikely it had looked in the days when he belonged to the Amity Club and fellows used to quote the jokes he flashed over a tankard and a steak at three in the morning! If his boyish hopes had been justified, if he had had talent as an actor, perhaps life would have tasted better to him, after all? "Robert Blackstone, K.C." He would soon be that. "Robert Blackstone, K.C., M.P." ? He might expect it. "Sir Robert Blackstone, Solicitor-General" ? It was on the cards. Why wouldn't his heart swell at the prospect, why didn't he catch his breath, what the deuce had become of all his emotions?

Oh! he was getting sentimental, listening to the fountain. Shut the window, ring the bell, see what briefs had come in!

"And a letter, sir!"

"All right," said Robert, "put it down."

The eagerness with which he used once to seize

his briefs! The swift glance to learn the fee, the impatience to gather the contents! Other incomes, other manners — he pulled the tape off leisurely today. "A dry stick!" he reiterated. Oh, one had to pay for success, there was no doubt.

His gaze wandered to the letter, and rested on it, startled; a little quiver ran through him. For several seconds a sensation that was half pleasure, half pain, held him quite still. The letter had been redirected from Plowden Buildings. It was addressed to "Robert Lawless, Esq.,"— c/o himself!

"T. R., HETTON-LE-HOLE, DURHAM, *May 1st.*

"DEAR SIR,—I have come across the 'script of your farcical comedy entitled *No Flies on Flossie,* all rights of which I acquired some years ago. It is a bit antique in parts now, and I think you might like to bring it up to date. I am putting it on at O.H. Ashton-under-Lyne to see how it shapes. We rehearse at P.O.W. Manchester. The first Call is for twelve o'clock, Monday, 18th inst.—Yours faithfully, "CAVENDISH PINK."

When the colour had crept back to his face, Robert laughed — the perfunctory laugh that he gave to a Judge's joke. He shrugged his shoulders. He put the letter down, and laughed again — he was acting to himself unconsciously. After a minute or two he picked it up and re-read it. How had Cavendish Pink come by the play? "Acquired" it? Not from the author. But the adventures of

the manuscript were unimportant. Pink? Pink had been a rather popular comedian. On the see-saw of life Mr. Pink had gone down while Mr. Blackstone went up.

For the third time he read the letter. He knew that "T.R." stood for "Theatre Royal," but the other abbreviations had mystified him. It recurred to him with emotion that "O.H." meant "Opera House," and that "P.O.W." meant "Prince of Wales's." That he could have forgotten these things even for a moment! He drummed his fingers on the briefs, and saw his Youth.

Of course he could have nothing to do with the matter. "*No Flies on Flossie* — the work, we understand, of Mr. Robert Blackstone, the well-known barrister," etc. He shuddered in imagining such a paragraph. He said that it was lucky "Robert Lawless" was forgotten; certainly "Robert Lawless" would reveal nothing to anyone who saw the piece in Ashton-under-Lyne, and doubtless its "run" would begin and end there. If he were silent, nobody would suspect his connection with it. But — well, if this had happened a few years earlier, he would have gone down to the place, just for a day, to see the performance. He said he would have felt curious about it — a few years ago!

Three or four hours had passed before he confessed to himself that he was curious now. He was in his library after dinner; and though he had no

intention of humouring his curiosity, he humoured his mind. It dwelt on scenes in the farce which had appeared to him brilliant when he wrote them. Would they appear brilliant to-day? He remembered the evening when he scribbled "Curtain," and Dick turned up and heard the last act read. "Jove! I didn't think you had it in you!" Dick had said; he was sitting on the window-sill — how it all came back! — how time flew! The score of hopes and disappointments the work had brought! With what passion he had despaired at that age! Could he despair so passionately at this? And then the excitement when the thing was taken — what a whirlwind of exultance! That night he got the news! He had dragged Dick out for oysters just before Scott's closed, and afterwards they had sat up talking till daylight. The piece was to be produced a few weeks hence, and Dick had stipulated for *two* stalls on the first night, to take his girl. . . . Thirteen years ago! And Dick was dead.

On the morrow Robert decided that he might, after all, run down to Ashton-under-Lyne. He said he would not enter the stage-door, no one should surmise that the author was present; he would simply take a seat in the dress circle like anybody else. Why not? To associate himself with *No Flies on Flossie* was impossible, but to resist the desire to peep at it would be motiveless. No doubt when he

was in the theatre he'd be hotly ashamed of having perpetuated such trash. Still —

He made no reply to Cavendish Pink. He was not prepared to revert to comic dialogue, even under a pseudonym, nor did he see his way to correspond on the subject. Probably it would be inferred that the letter had miscarried, or that Mr. Lawless had died. Well, he *was* dead. Yet Robert Blackstone owned to himself that he regretted being unable to attend Bob Lawless's rehearsals. He did not own it all at once, he regretted it some time before he owned it. Then he said again that if this had happened a few years earlier, he might have — Eh? Just for a day or two? Yes, he would have given himself the fun then! It wouldn't have mattered so much a few years earlier.

How ardently, in the period when he was a small-part actor, he had looked forward to striding about a stage as the author and telling the company what to do! He had never rehearsed in a West End theatre, or he would have known that authors are rather small fry after the plays are written. It had been his dream. The author! And of course he would be privileged to smoke — he had imagined himself with a cigar between his lips, and his hands in the pockets of a fur overcoat. In his dream it was generally winter, because he wanted to wear a fur overcoat. Nice girls waylaid him in the wings, and said, " Do write in a line for me to speak, Mr. Law-

less, *please!*" And he did. The courtly consideration that he had always shown — in his dream — to the humblest members of the cast! The glowing terms in which everyone had spoken of him — in his dream! . . . It would have been agreeable to go to Manchester for the rehearsals.

About a week later he said that of course he wouldn't be so stupid, but that as a matter of fact he *could* go if he chose; he could go as "Mr. Lawless!" It was in the highest degree unlikely that anyone in a third-rate provincial company would know his face. He wouldn't do it, because he had long ago left such follies behind, but there was really nothing else to prevent him.

"The first call is for twelve o'clock, Monday, 18th instant!" Constantly the man thought of it, sometimes he fingered the letter again; daily, in the drawer of his desk, under the documents, under the briefs, it tempted him — the Call from the past.

Oh, out of the question!

He supposed it *would* be a folly?

After all, should he go?

If the Easter Term did not end on the 16th of May, there would have been no story; but it does.

He felt strange to himself when he took his ticket on Sunday. He felt excited, nervous, guilty. On the platform he avoided a man whom he knew. He realised the sensations of a fugitive from justice, and threw an apprehensive glance about the restau-

rant car. What should he say if he were asked where he was going? He was sorry the rehearsals were to be held in a big city like Manchester; what more likely than that an acquaintance would run against him in the street? As to the hotel, it would brim with danger: at any moment someone might exclaim, "How d'ye do? — what has brought *you* here?" But, to be sure, he merely meant to remain in an hotel for the night — on the morrow he would go into lodgings. They would be extremely uncomfortable, but at all events they would be private, and it was only for a week, after all. A week would soon pass! He found himself wishing that it had passed already.

Rain was falling when he arrived in Manchester. He spent a melancholy evening in the "Smoke-room." Presently he saw a theatrical paper, and turning it over, observed advertisements of "professional apartments"; several of the advertised houses were in Manchester. The idea of installing himself in theatrical lodgings again carried a little tremor with it; but it was not disagreeable. These addresses to his hand, moreover, would spare him trouble.

Rain was falling when he shaved. No matter — it would be well to make his arrangements before he went to the rehearsal! He breakfasted briskly, opposite a commercial traveller who performed extraordinary feats with a knife and fork. At ten

o'clock he had his bag put on to a cab. "All Saints" he said, for in Manchester all theatrical landladies and "All Saints" are neighbours.

The side streets of All Saints were not prepossessing. As he rang the first bell, he glanced about him wonderingly. Had he really been happy in places like this when he was young? He was relieved when the slatternly householder answered that she had only a "combined room." He interviewed several householders without success.

Gradually the manner in which he made his applications lost something of its legal stiffness; he laboured for a touch of the old-time freedom which he knew was demanded by the situation. He rang another bell, and a young woman in curling-pins came to the door.

"What rooms have you got this week?" said Robert, uneasily familiar.

"What do you want?" asked the woman.

"I want a sitting-room and bedroom," he said. And she was able to accommodate him.

Against the piano was a pile of comic songs; on the mantelpiece there were likenesses of performers in tights. The rooms were cosily furnished, and the rent was ten shillings a week inclusive of gas and fires; the Manchester weather was still chilly.

"I'll take them," said Robert.

When he had unpacked his bag, he smoked a cigar in the parlour, and smiled. "One always re-

turns to one's first love," he mused; and really the first love looked attractive, though he viewed the signboard of a "mechanical chimney sweep" through the window.

Presently he asked his landlady for her card.

"I'll have to give you my professional card," she said, "but it has got the address on it; I'm in the Profession myself."

He read, "Mdlle. Superba: Terpsichorean Gymnast."

"That's me," she said, pointing, "that portrait there. I only let rooms as a 'obby — I don't let regular all the year round. Think it's good?"

"It doesn't flatter you," said Robert. But she was captivating in her gymnast's costume; he would never have supposed the photograph was meant for her. "I'm fortunate to find you 'letting' this week."

"Well, it's like this, it gives me something to do when I'm at home. That's what my husband says; he says 'It gives you something to do.' And I don't take ladies, they're a bit too much —'Can we 'ave some 'ot water, Ma?' all hours of the day; 'Can I come and 'eat my curling-tongs in the kitchen fire, Ma?' Ladies are a handful, and, as I say, I only 'let' as a 'obby. I'm going on tour again in August. Perhaps you've seen me in the Halls?"

"I've often applauded you in the Halls," he said, courteously untruthful; "I was puzzled how your

face was so familiar to me." He was conscious that he hadn't recovered the tone yet, he knew that he was being much too formal. Could he pluck up the spirit to call a landlady "Ma" again himself?

There was an unaccustomed exhilaration in his veins as he drove to the Prince of Wales's; he did not define the feeling, but what he felt was "younger." When the cab jerked to a stoppage, his pulses beat like a lover's. He leapt out, and saw "Stage Entrance" painted on a dirty door. Again he pulled a stage-door open. "What name?" he was asked; "Mr. Lawless," he answered. And all at once he did not know if he was happy or ashamed; but he knew that he trembled.

The theatre looked dark for the first minute. He received a dim impression of ill-dressed people, drew a breathful of mouldy atmosphere that swept him back into the past. A vociferous man shook hands with him, and called him "my boy." "So you've turned up, my boy! That's all right. Afraid you hadn't had my note."

"How do you do, Mr. Pink," responded Robert.

They sat down in the stalls swathed in holland wrappers, and the mist before him melted. The ill-dressed people acquired features; he realised that the rehearsal had begun, and that the figures on the stage were the butler and the maid-servant reading the opening scene of his farce.

"It wants freshening up, Lawless," said Mr. Pink; "it's a bit Noah's Arky here and there — old-fashioned. Still I think there's stuff in it. I'd like you to keep your ears open, see where you can stick in some lines. Make it modern, my boy, make it a bit topical; you know what I mean?"

"Oh — er — of course," said Robert with dismay. "Yes, certainly I must see what I can do."

He was painfully embarrassed; he had not felt so nervous since the day he heard himself pleading in Court for the first time. When the vociferous man left him, he thanked Heaven. Vaguely he thought of making his escape, of sending a telegram to say he was recalled to town.

"Mr. Lawless?"

A pale, shabby girl had come to him. She had very beautiful grey eyes; he was surprised that he had overlooked her.

"Yes?" he said.

"I'm to play 'Flossie'— I wanted to ask you a question about her. Is she simple in the first act, or only putting it on?"

He had no longer any views on the subject, but it would never do to say so.

"Simple," he said. "Oh, decidedly simple in the first act."

"That's what I thought!" she nodded, "and Mr. Pink wants me to do it the other way — Mr. Pink says she is only putting it on."

He perceived that he had encouraged her to defy the management.

"Of course," he added hastily, "when I say 'simple,' I mean relatively simple — everything is relative!"

"Oh, y-e-s," she said. But she was evidently at sea. After a moment she went on, "What I really want to know is how she is to speak those lines sitting on the hamper — is she sincere in that speech or isn't she?"

"That, of course, is the question," murmured Robert. "Yes, precisely! That speech is the — the —"

"It's the keynote to the part," she said.

He wished distressfully he could remember what speech she meant. Perhaps, after all, he had better be frank!

"To be quite honest with you," he said, "I wrote the piece a good many years ago; and since then I —"

"Oh, I see!" she laughed. "How funny! Since then you've written so many others that you've forgotten what it's about?"

"Exactly," said Robert; "that is to say, not at all. I haven't written any others, but I *have* forgotten what it's about."

They regarded each other silently for a moment. . . . She seemed a singularly nice girl.

"I was quite a young man when I wrote it," he said abruptly.

"And you've done nothing since?"

"Well — er — not in the dramatic line. You're rehearsing my last attempt."

"Oh, I do hope it'll be a success!" she said earnestly, "then you'll go on working. It must be rather — rather queer to see us rehearsing a piece you wrote so long ago?"

"It is," said Robert, "very queer." He paused again — he was again abrupt: "Once I knew every line of the three acts by heart!"

She lifted her eyes to him gravely, and didn't speak for a second. He liked her for not speaking — he saw that she understood.

"How it must take you back!" she whispered.

He sighed — and smiled. "So, you see, Mr. Pink probably knows more about your part to-day than the author does! — Er —you needn't tell all the Company what I've said."

"As if I should!" she exclaimed. "Oh! there's my cue, I must fly!"

"Miss Wilson!" shouted Pink. "Come on, Miss Wilson, please — take up your cues!"

"My fault," called Robert, "*I'm* to blame."

She looked back over her shoulder, smiling at him as she ran, and somehow the rehearsal was more in-

teresting to Robert. The nice girl read the lines he had invented thirteen years before — and listening to her, he remembered.

Rain was falling when the rehearsal finished. She hadn't an umbrella. "Which way do you go?" he asked as the stage-door slammed.

"All Saints," she replied; "Rumford Street."

"That's my way too. I want a cab — I can give you a lift."

"A cab?" She was openly astonished. "If you *must* squander money, you can take a penny car. But why not walk?"

"Is that what you do in the wet?"

"Well, if I took a cab every time it was wet in Manchester, my salary wouldn't go far, would it?"

"I have no idea what your salary is."

"Three pounds," she said frankly. "It isn't much for a leading lady, eh?"

"It isn't much for a leading lady, but it's a good deal for a young girl. In any other business three pounds a week wants a lot of earning."

"Oh, I know," she said. "I've got young brothers in the city. They call me 'the millionaire of the family!'"

"Do they like your being on tour alone?"

"Well, you see, it was necessary for me to earn my own living; things weren't very bright at home when I grew up. I don't spend all my salary on the delicacies of the season — I send half to my mother

every week. I couldn't be any help to her if I were in a clerkship like the boys."

"But you're fond of the stage, aren't you? You sounded enthusiastic when you floored me with those questions."

She shrugged her shoulders. "At the beginning I was in love with it; I've been in the profession eight years now. You're giving me all your umbrella!"

"There's no expense attached to that," said Robert.

The cars were full, and she was evidently averse from a cab; so they travelled Oxford Street on foot, keeping close together.

"I suppose you'll go and see a show to-night?" she inquired.

"I hadn't thought of it," he said. "Shall you?"

"There's nothing else to do when one isn't playing. It's ghastly sitting in diggings all the evening, isn't it?"

"It must be dull if you're alone," he assented. It occurred to him that his own evening was going to be very dull indeed.

"Oh, I'm not alone, I'm staying with the girl who plays 'Aunt Rachel,' but it's dull anyhow. We thought of asking for seats at the St. James's."

"I — I think," said Robert, "that I'll go too. Perhaps I shall see you there. Or we might all go together, mightn't we?"

"Why, yes," she replied, "it would be very nice. Let's!"

"It would be delightful!" said Robert. "Yes, let's!"

They had reached her door, and she asked him if he would go in and have some tea. He said he would. They found the other girl at home, toasting crumpets. Miss Wilson toasted crumpets. Robert toasted crumpets also. They all knelt on the hearthrug and toasted crumpets together. His hostesses cried that they were "rising in their profession, having the author to tea!" He laughed. He cracked a joke. He wondered what Edward would say if he could see him.

At the St. James's the girls obtained two stalls for nothing, and Robert insisted on paying for one, though Miss Wilson reproved him for such waste of money. "We could quite easily have asked for three," she said. "It *is* silly of you! You make me angry."

Greatly daring, he proposed supper when the performance was over. The restaurants of Manchester are far to seek, but he didn't know that; he even told himself that it mattered nothing if he were recognised; the girls were ladies, a man had a right to take his friends to supper! However, they wouldn't go; that is to say, Miss Wilson wouldn't go; the other girl looked as if she wanted to. Miss Wilson said he must wait to see if his

piece was a success. "If it makes a hit, well — perhaps!" He understood that she took it for granted he was poor — she wouldn't let him be extravagant: the situation was not without a charm.

They chattered gaily as far as her apartments. "I can't ask you in after the show," she murmured.

"No, I know," he said, "I remember!" As he strolled on, he reflected that the day had been remarkably agreeable. He made for his lodging in high good humour. In Oxford Street he started, he received a shock, almost he staggered — he had perceived that he was whistling!

The terpsichorean gymnast gave him eggs boiled to perfection in the morning, and much better coffee than he got at home. As he tapped the second shell, it occurred to Robert that he had not opened a newspaper yesterday. Extraordinary! How often he had winced in recollecting that he never looked at a newspaper when he was a provincial actor! And actually he had been as bad again. He bought several newspapers after breakfast — and kept glancing at the clock.

It was rather jolly to sally forth to rehearsal, though rain was falling when it was time to go. He entered the theatre with zest to-day. Even he resented less stiffly the vociferous man's calling him "my boy." Miss Wilson's pale face smiled at him as at a friend. He conversed with one or two other

members of the company, and saw his way to inserting a topical allusion in the dialogue. Pink pronounced it "devilish good." Robert the Reviving was gratified that Pink thought his line "devilish good." When he was asked vociferously if he would "come across and have a drink," he didn't say "no." They drank prosperity to the piece in a vulgar bar. And he took back a box of sandwiches, and Peggy Wilson, and "Aunt Rachel," and he, shared them in the stalls.

Almost the next thing that Robert realised vividly was that it was Friday. (Rain was falling.) It amazed him how the interval had flown. "Aunt Rachel" had gone over to Bury, where her fiancé was playing at the "Royal," and Miss Wilson, left alone, was coming in to tea. Robert had ordered cream with the tea, and Simnel cake. He stood at the window eager-eyed; the sign-board of the "mechanical chimney-sweep" did not obtrude itself to him. He remembered how long it was since he last watched for a girl to come to tea.

But when she turned the corner he remembered only that he was to have a gracious afternoon. He wheeled the armchair to the hearth for her, and brought her a footstool. She was less talkative than usual. Somehow the first few minutes were disappointing.

"I have to go on Tuesday," he remarked presently; "and then it'll be all over."

"But you're coming to Ashton-under-Lyne for the production?"

"I don't know; I don't know that I shall be able to. I wish I hadn't to go back — I haven't enjoyed anything so much for years. By the way, I want you to do me a favour — I want you girls to come to supper with me on Monday night. I thought we might go and see a show" — he didn't notice that he was saying "show" again, instead of "theatre" — "and have a little supper here afterwards. I'd suggest a restaurant, but there'd be no time to eat anything before we were turned out."

"What would your landlady say?"

"I've sounded her. I said, 'I suppose you wouldn't think there was any harm in my bringing two ladies in to supper after the show one evening?' 'Certainly *not*, Mr. Lawless,' she said. 'Would you like it hot or cold?' That's a landlady that *is* a landlady. Will you?"

"We'll see about it," said Miss Wilson.

"You might say 'yes,'" he begged. "Give me a happy memory for the end."

"But it won't be the end; we shall often see you, sha'n't we, if the piece runs?"

"Perhaps it won't run. And even if it does — I'm a busy man."

"Too busy to think of your pals? What do you do?"

"Are we pals?" he questioned. "I'm yours;

but are you mine? Really? You've known me such a very little while."

"No longer than you've known me."

"It's not the same thing, though. You meet lots of men; I don't meet lots of girls. To me this week has been quite out of the common; to you it's only one of the fifty-two."

"What do you do in London?" she inquired again. "What are you?"

"A dry stick!" said Robert.

"Well, you aren't a dry stick in Manchester!" she said.

It was not a brilliant reply, but she couldn't have made one that would have pleased him more.

Yet the tea was a failure. She never ate cake, she told him; somehow she didn't care for tea either this afternoon — she sipped about a quarter of a cupful. He had scarcely stirred his own when she was declaring she must go, "You won't think it rude of me if I run away now?" He gave her her muff blankly. A creature of moods, as changeful as an April day! But when she was sunny, *how* sunny! The table looked pathetic to him when she had gone. He stood at the window, downcast; the signboard of the chimney-sweep darkened the road.

Mademoiselle Superba put the Simnel cake on the top of the piano, because there wasn't a sideboard, and it stood there uncovered till it was dusty. Then

the night of the supper arrived, and there were a galantine, and prawns in aspic, and a mayonnaise; and the first thing the creature of moods did when she came in was to pounce on the dusty cake and devour a slice before she took her hat off.

"Peggy!" exclaimed the other girl reprovingly.

"I may?" she cried, flashing a glance at Robert. Yes, she knew she might! She knew she might do anything she chose there. "I'm going to have more light!" she said, and lit another burner of the gaselier.

Mademoiselle Superba — majestic in black silk, with pendent pearls in her ears, and her hair dressed like Truefitt's window — looked in for a moment to ask if all was well. Robert thanked her for doing it so extremely well. Peggy said sweetly, "I hear you're in the profession too?" The woman was pleased at that. So was Robert — it was nice of Peggy. Because there was no sideboard, cutlery and plates were set forth on the piano; because there were no champagne glasses, they drank the champagne out of tumblers.

"Didn't I forbid you to be extravagant?" cried Peggy.

He liked "forbid." "Forgive me!" he smiled.

"This once," she laughed. "But you must be very economical in London."

"I shall have no parties like it in London, I assure you."

"Nor I!" said she.

"Do you live in London?"

She threw him a nod. "Crouch End."

"Tell me more," he urged. "And let me give you both some salad!"

"More? Well, once we had a servant. Now we haven't. I do housework when I'm at home — I blacklead the grates. That's why my hands aren't pretty."

"Don't!" he said, pained. Her hands weren't pretty, but he revered them now he knew the reason.

"Peggy!" said the other girl, dismayed. The other girl was obsessed by "manners" when she was out.

"I'm frightfully untidy in the morning. In novels the poor heroine always has on 'snowy cuffs and collars' with her rags. Pickles! In real life the poor heroine has to think of the laundry bills. Oh! you'd be shocked at me in the morning. After the boys have gone, I turn a room out sometimes — my skirt pinned up, and a duster over my head! Can you see me? Mother's not very strong — the cooking's business enough for mother. Then I go up to the agents' and try to get something to do. In a *very* smart costume! with a picture hat — I made it! — and white gloves. Oh! you'd be impressed by Peggy in the afternoon; you wouldn't recognise me in the Strand. You're not seeing my

best clothes here, don't think it — I'm in an engagement, I'm stopping the expenses!"

"Peggy!" groaned the other girl again. He divined a kick under the table. "You're coming down to see the dress rehearsal on the 5th, Mr. Lawless?" she struck in.

"It would be a treat to me, but I can't; I've somewhere else to go."

"It would be a 'treat' to him!" pealed Peggy. "We shall be kept in the theatre half the night — we shall be dog-tired — and *he* would find it a 'treat!' What it is to be young! Where have you to go, Mr. Dramatist?"

"I have to go to a very dull public dinner on the 5th," he said. "I shall think of you dog-tired in the garden act when they serve the *chapon rôti.*"

"Send us the *chapon rôti,*" she said, "it'd be much more use!" She snatched a sprig of parsley from a dish and stuck it in her hair — "Mother always tried to kill my passion for dress!" she cried.

He proffered her mayonnaise, and she said she wanted to play the piano. Though he feared that even a landlady who was a terpsichorean gymnast might have objections to her rattling "Florodora" at one in the morning, his spirits were high until she forsook the music-stool and sank to reminiscence on the hearthrug. Then she made his heart ache; she told him some of her vicissitudes — no engagement,

no money, no food. His eyes filled as he listened. What this girl had been through!

It was two o'clock. He saw his guests home (Rain was falling.) "Good night — good-bye!" he looked at Rumford Street for the last time — how familiar it had become! "Don't forget me," he heard himself whisper, clasping Peggy's hand. Her gaze assured him. She went in — the step was desolate; he turned thoughtfully away.

And as he walked back, to the room where she had been, he knew he was in love — with her, with the Theatre, with the life he used to lead. In the wet, black streets of Manchester he saw the naked truth, and he realised that his life was a failure. A man could change his environment, but not himself. He felt that he would be happier earning three pounds a week, like her, on the stage than he would ever be as Robert Blackstone, K.C. One mustn't say these things; but he felt it — felt that he would rejoice to be a minor actor again, and see Peggy in the morning, and see Peggy every day.

No Flies on Flossie tottered for six nights, died, and was buried. You may read those facts elsewhere. These are facts concerning *No Flies on Flossie* which you may read only here. And in Garden Court, Temple, there was for a long time a distinguished barrister debating a subtle point. He questioned if, when he made a trip to the past and grew enamoured of it, he fell in love with a girl,

or only with an atmosphere. Because that he *was* in love, still in love, was indisputable; he looked back constantly and yearned. The sole doubt was what he was in love with. It was the weak spot in the case, and with his usual keenness he had put his finger on it — he discerned how liable he was to be deceived, how naturally he might be attributing to the girl the fascination that belonged to the surroundings. If it was the atmosphere that lent Peggy enchantment, he would be insane to choose a wife so different from, say, the placid matron who blessed Edward. *Per contra,* if he loved Peggy herself, why should he tramp the room like this, instead of asking her to marry him?

He swore he did love the girl herself.

He trembled lest her halo was the limelight.

Then having come to a conclusion, he found her advertisement in *The Stage,* and wrote asking her to call on him " at Mr. Blackstone's chambers."

She went promptly. The dignified clerk ushered her into Robert's presence, and Robert had never seen that room look so gay.

" How good of you to come! " he exclaimed happily.

" How good of you to think of me, you mean! " she said — " I've been ' out ' ever since *No Flies* finished; have you written another piece, and are you going to offer me a good part in it? I say, you do know swells! "

"Who, Blackstone?"

She nodded. "Do you think he'll come in while I'm here? I was reading about him the other day — Miss Peggy Wilson would be going strong, meeting celebrities of the Bar! This *is* the Blackstone, isn't it, the K.C.?"

"He's a very recent K.C.," murmured Robert; "there's his new wig in that box."

"Oh, do let me look!" she said, darting radiantly. "May I?"

"You may even try it on, if you like," said Robert; "he wouldn't mind."

She had her hat-pins out in a second. "Oh, *isn't* Peggy going strong!" she laughed. "How does it suit me?" And then turning from the strip of glass, "Why are you so grave all of a sudden? Didn't you mean me to?"

"Yes, yes; I was thinking what a fool I had been not to beg you to come sooner," sighed Robert. "Take it off, and let me talk to you."

"Serious?"

"Very serious — an engagement."

"You *are* a trump!" she said; "I've wanted one so badly."

"Ah, but you mustn't accept this unless you like it, and I hope you won't mind it's being a short engagement. Peggy, I love you. I love the ground you walk on, and the clothes you wear, and everything you say and do. Will you be my wife?"

"Oh!" she gasped. Her face was colourless.

"Can't you care for me?"

"I do care," she whispered, and — It seemed incredible, yet they were round her! and his heart was thumping like a boy's. "Oh, my sweet!" he stammered, releasing her at last. Just like a boy again — "Oh, my sweet!"

And her colour had come back, and she smiled up at him, with the smile that no other woman had ever equalled. "Let me put on my hat before Blackstone comes in," she said joyously; "look what you've done to my hair — it'd give us away!"

"Peggy," said Robert, "*I'm* Blackstone."

The smile faded; she stood gazing at him wide-eyed.

"I called myself 'Lawless' when I wrote that farce, and then I chucked writing and went in for the Bar. I had forgotten all about the thing for years when I got Pink's note, but I couldn't resist going down to the Call; I went as a lark, nobody knew me, I thought it wouldn't make any difference. And then I met *you*, Peggy — and it made all the difference in the world! Why don't you laugh?"

"You are a great man," said the girl solemnly; "you oughtn't to marry me."

"Oh, my dearest dear," he cried, "don't you understand that I — the real 'I' — am the man you saw there, and that only you do see the real 'me'? London has forgotten the author of that piece, but

he didn't die, darling — his heart's just the same, though he looks so different. Robert Blackstone's the man who wears the wig and gown, and can make things right for your mother and the youngsters, and who'll give you a title by-and-by, my love; but your husband'll be the bohemian who toasted the crumpets, and lodged at Mademoiselle Superba's, the terpsichorean gymnast! You sha'n't have time to 'wish' for anything — I'd like to buy the Earth for you! — and you must come to hear me 'speak,' and I want you to be proud of our position, but at home I shall always be the 'boy' who fell in love with you, Peggy, the 'Bob Lawless' who went to look for his youth — and found it!"

Beyond the open window, the flowers of the garden were bright in sunshine, and the fountain tinkled dreamily. There was a nurse-maid with a child among the flowers; he knew with thanksgiving that he was doing well to marry.

"Will you kiss me again, sweetheart?"

"Yes," she said — "*Bob!*"

THE END

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